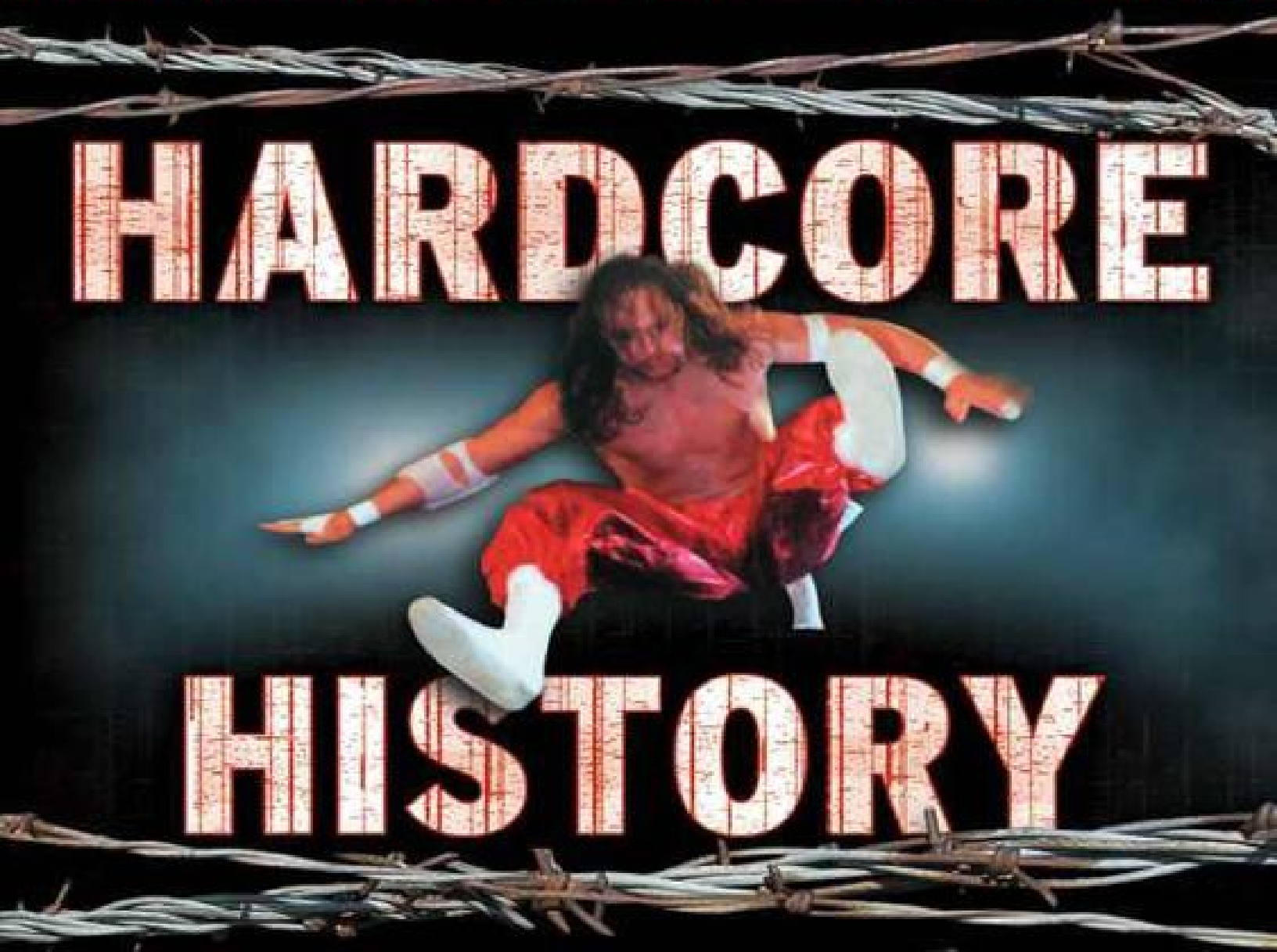
Foreword by "The Franchise" Shane Douglas

HARDCORE HISTORY



THE EXTREMELY UNAUTHORIZED STORY OF ECW

SCOTT E. WILLIAMS with photos by GEORGE TAHINOS

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This book is dedicated to my parents, Charles and Donna Williams.

My dad, for all the times he took my young self to wrestling matches when he would rather have been watching gravy congeal.

My mom, for getting me my first typewriter and a subscription to *Writer's Digest*, and for reading every goofy piece of writing I ever came up with.

They have both supported me through every problem I created for myself and with every crazy aspiration I chased. They were the only two people who never doubted when, as early as age eight, I said I would write a book, so this one's for them.

Dedicating a book to the two of them is not nearly thanks enough.

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FOREWORD

MUCH HAS BEEN WHITEN about the wrestling revolution that began in Philadelphia in the early 1990s. Much of it has been covered with the sands of time, but even today whenever an action looks remotely legit, legions of fans worldwide chant with raised chests, “E-C-Dub! E-C-Dub! E-C-Dub!”—a fact that has bedeviled the princely Vinnie Mac.

Only a handful of those legions, though, were first-round players in that revolution. Today, the path that wrestling has taken since ECW’s inception seems to be almost universally known. The shelves of DVD distributors are littered with volumes that repute to tell the story of ECW, even its “rise and fall.” However, the complete story has gone largely untold—until now.

Scott Williams, the co-author of the Terry Funk and Bill Watts autobiographies, has painstakingly researched the revolution that changed wrestling and even continues to hold sway over the loyal legions who call themselves wrestling fans. Williams has approached the retelling of the revolution with the zeal of a prosecutor preparing to indict a mob kingpin. Much of the story was news to me, the central figure of what was this new organization of extreme—its Franchise.

As a 23-year veteran of our great sport, I am proud to say that the crowning achievement of my career was spent as the main evil antagonist of this revolution. Professional wrestling has been, since its inception, the male version of a soap opera. Loved by generations, its following has grown larger with each successive generation that has watched it. That was until the early 1990s.

Following the titanic success of wrestling in the 1980s with its larger-than-life superstar, Hulk Hogan, it seemed as though wrestling could grow no larger. The personification of “Train, say your prayers, take your vitamins!” had run out of evildoers to combat. Or had he? The genius behind the then-World Wrestling Federation, Vince McMahon, believed he could use his Midas touch to create an even more menacing set of villains for his superstar Hulkster to face and vanquish. Sort of a wrestling meets

Star Wars. On paper it sounded fine. In practice it was dreadful. Suddenly those of us who grew up loving wrestling were being inundated with grown men in turkey costumes who were called—and I'm not joking here—the Gobbledygooker. Garbage men, mad plumbers, and every sort of inane character were being introduced to endanger Hulksters rule. There was only one tiny problem with this business plan.

At this time reality TV was in its infancy and growing *fast*. Shows like *Cops* were just beginning to peak the interest of the same target audience as professional wrestling, the 18- to 49-year-old male demographic. Reality was all the rage, and grown men dressed as chickens were not even close to reality!!!

Enter the era of *extreme!!!* Using the blue-collar feel of shows like *Cops*, a band of largely unknown wrestlers was setting the stage to wrest the reins of wrestling away from the WWF's Vince McMahon and place them solely in the hands of a man who even those of us who worked for him would call insane—Mr. Paul Heyman.

On my first trip to Philadelphia for then-Eastern Championship Wrestling, I was picked up at the airport with the true legend of our sport, Terry Funk.

"Terry," I asked on our way to the arena, "how long do you think well ride this train before it runs off the tracks?"

"Hopefully," he responded, "we'll get a couple of weekends of pay out of it."

In actuality my career would reside at ECW for more than seven glorious years. Seven years that would transform wrestling from the corniness of the WWF's Gobbledygooker to the "New Attitude," which would literally save the federation.

ECW took a violent Japanese style of wrestling and built it upon a core of largely unproven or untested wrestlers. Few of us had ever been on U.S. television, let alone main-event players. But what we lacked in resumé, we more than made up for it with *attitude*, and loads of it.

I once coined the phrase, "the island of misfit toys" in referring to the band of brothers who would become the foot soldiers who brought the revolution to life and carried it to its ignominious end. We were the boys who didn't fit in the WWF or WCW. No, we were just the names that would ignite the flame of the sport of professional wrestling in that little bingo hall at the corners of Swanson and Ritner streets in Philly.

This is the book of the story of that revolution. This is as complete a retelling of that story as you will find. Read on and engage the revolution that was ECW, ECW, ECW! Long live the revolution!!!

“—THE FRANCHISE” SHANE DOUGLAS

ACKNOWLEDGEMNTS

OBVIOUSLY there are more people who deserve thanks than there is room to list them. Luckily, most of them are people whose names are connected to a quote or two. Certain folks bear specific mention, however.

Thanks to Sports Publishing for giving me the opportunity to tell this story. Many thanks also to my editor on this book, Elisa Bock Laird. Without her steering this ship, it would be lost at sea. The really clever subheadings in each chapter were hers.

I would also like to thank each of the many ECW performers and crew members who took the time to help me understand the unique time and place in wrestling that ECW represented. Special thanks to Shane Douglas, for his time, insights, and a wonderful foreword. Raven, in addition to being one of the funniest pro wrestlers ever, was also very generous with his time.

Also, many thanks to Jim Sukman for sharing his vast ECW collection. Jim, along with Jason Hess, Michael Mensik, and John D. Williams also deserve credit for listening to me babble incessantly about this book.

Chris Clinch deserves a big thanks for helping me find an outlet to reach people with ECW stories to tell. Rob Marco, one of those people, was a big contributor, helping me reach several of the New Englanders who worked with or for ECW. Many thanks, Rob and Chris.

Sheldon Goldberg, an unbelievably nice guy, was a huge help, but even if he hadn't been, I'd still encourage wrestling fans to check out his promotion, NECW, and you can view his weekly show online, at www.necw.tv.

Finally, thanks to everyone who agreed to talk to me for this book. Every quote (unless attributed otherwise) came from interviews conducted expressly for this book. I would like to thank the dozens of people who shared their experiences and insights, both those named in the book and those select few who (for various reasons) asked to remain anonymous.

Two others who asked for anonymity were a tremendous help in sorting out the bankruptcy chapter, helping to point out where the dots connected. Thank you, mysterious gentlemen.

I owe a huge thanks to *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* editor/publisher Dave Meltzer, who was instrumental in getting me started down the path that has led me to this book. Dave also helped me put things into context and pointed out some errors that would have remained without his participation.

And thanks to *The Galveston County Daily News*, for the invaluable learning experience that strange place has provided. I cover crime and courts for the newspaper (Texas' oldest), and Dave Meltzer once introduced me as "the only person I know who can regularly tell me stranger things than what goes on in the world of pro wrestling." I have spent most of the last decade there and continue to love the bizarre world of Galveston County.

Finally, thanks, as always, to my family—Brooke, Brody, and perhaps most of all, my wife Brenda, for putting up with my hours of working from home, present yet absent. I love you guys very much.

CHAPTER 1

TRI-STATE WRESTLING ALLIANCE

“Joel Goodhart was insane”

–TERRY FUNK FROM 1998 INTERVIEW

FOR THE WRESTLING INDUSTRY in the United States, early 1991 was the worst of times, and pretty much every fan knew it. Vince McMahons World Wrestling Federation was serving up a watered-down version of the cartoon-character soap opera that had been more successful in the 1980s. The biggest departure from this approach was a main-event *angle* (storyline), in which Sgt. Slaughter became an Iraqi traitor. Many saw this as exploiting the Gulf War and tuned out. *Wrestlemania VII*, the WWF’s biggest show of the year, moved from the Los Angeles Coliseum to the much smaller L.A. Sports Arena. The company line was (and still is) that security concerns over threats to Slaughter forced the move, but the fact is ticket sales were abysmal.

Behind the scenes, McMahon was also distracted, staring down a double-barreled problem—allegations of sexual improprieties in his company and the arrest of a Pennsylvania doctor who would become a lead witness in an eventual federal trial for McMahon on steroid charges.

The closest thing the WWF had to a business rival, the Turner Broadcasting-owned World Championship Wrestling, made McMahons company look like the pinnacle of success by comparison. With a talented athletic cast that included the Steiner brothers, Brian Pillman, Barry Windham, and Vader (not to mention WCW’s connection to New Japan, which provided access to such incredible performers as Keiji “The Great Muta” Muto and Jushin Liger), WCW had the tools to give fans a product that was as stiff and athletic as the WWF was farcical. Instead of offering counter-programming, however, WCW tried to imitate the WWF with zany characters and implausible scenarios aimed at attracting a younger audience. Tensions between world champion Rie Flair and WCW head honcho Jim Herd were about to come to a head with the legendary Flair on his way out of the company.

Meanwhile, a generation of wrestling fans who had spent their formative years watching Flair and Hogan had grown up. Unfortunately, wrestling had not grown up with them. Many of these fans were reading publications such as the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* and the *Pro Wrestling Torch*. Unlike the wrestling magazines that were popular in the 1960s and 1970s, these newsletters (or *dirt sheets*, as many in the wrestling business came to call them) made no pretense that pro wrestling's outcomes were anything but predetermined. With that out of the way, the newsletters were free to discuss the business and the politics behind what fans saw in the ring. Fans who followed the wrestling business to this degree were called *smart marks* or *hardcore fans*.

In Philadelphia, a man named Joel Goodhart had decided that he could fill the niche left open by the two majors. Although he never intended it, the creation of this new wrestling network would set off a chain of events that would give *hardcore* a whole new meaning.

IT ALL BEGAN IN PHILLY

Whoever dubbed Philadelphia the "City of Brotherly Love" never attended an athletic event there. For years, Philadelphia fans have been known within the sporting world as among the most demanding, bloodthirsty fans in North America. They were the fans who cemented their reputation as Americas most vicious in 1968 when they booed Santa Claus, pelting the jolly symbol of Christmas goodwill with snowballs and profanity in Veterans Stadium. They were the fans who gave a loud cheer when Dallas Cowboys receiver Michael Irvin suffered a career-ending neck injury during a 1999 game in the same stadium.

Philadelphia's wrestling fans were cut from the same sweet-natured cloth. In the 1980s when the WWF's cartoon show version of wrestling was stamping out regional promotions around the country, one of the most competitive cities was Philadelphia, because WWF national rival Jim Crockett Promotions put on more serious shows, which gave those fans what they wanted to see—blood and lots of it.

Philadelphia fans could also be merciless, particularly to heavily pushed *babyfaces*, or wrestling good guys. Clean-cut babyfaces who talked about "giving 110 percent for all those great fans out there" routinely heard profane indictments of their masculinity when they went to Philadelphia.

These passionate, demanding fans were the ones Joel Goodhart was trying to reach when he launched his independent promotion, the Tri-State Wrestling Alliance in 1990. The name represented the states of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware.

Tri-State quickly gained a following among the hardcore fans in the northeastern United States. The shows were quarterly four-hour spectacles, with names like *Gory, Gory Hallelujah*, and they earned the favor of a small, but rabid group of fans.

However, each of Goodhart's shows was loaded with some of the top talent available to independent promoters, so much so that his payroll made profitability a remote possibility, even as he was drawing the best independent crowds in the United States. Take, for example, his March 2, 1991, show. It drew 1,735 fans, making for a gate of $32,629. The main event was a match between Terry Funk and Jerry Lawler, in which the fans acted as lumberjacks. That show also featured a match with Cactus Jack versus Eddie Gilbert, whose feud became a favorite of hardcore wrestling fans. Other name wrestlers on the card—Ivan Koloff, The Sheik, Abdullah the Butcher, and Manny Fernandez—each of whom came with a hefty price tag, ensured that Goodhart was going to have a hard time making a profit even with a sellout.

Further, Goodhart's relatively impressive crowds did not seem that impressive in the Philadelphia Convention Hall, where he ran shows. The building, which was demolished in 2003, could hold more than four times as many as the best crowds Goodhart ever drew.

"It was just too big a place," fan Bob Barnett said. "He could have put a couple thousand people in that building, and it looked empty, because it was just too big a place."

Barnett, a California attorney who had been a wrestling fan since childhood, said he flew across the country for Goodhart's March 2, 1991, show, after hearing how good the previous show was. Barnett said he also believed his time to see a Goodhart show was short.

"And I sort of had a feeling, because of the overhead he must have had with all that spending on talent, he wasn't going to be around long," Barnett

said. “Plus, he had The Sheik versus Abdullah the Butcher, and The Sheik was the main guy at the first card I ever saw, so I *had to* go.”

Barnett said that once he got to the hotel in Philadelphia, The Sheik was already there and came to him with an offer that was more like an order.

“He said he was going to follow me to the arena, and if I got him lost, he was going to cut me,” Barnett said, laughing.

The threat might not have been an idle one, however, because The Sheik was notorious in his heyday for taping razor blades to his fingers to use on fans who tried to attack him on his way to and from the ring.

They got to the arena with The Sheik riding in the same limousine that transported him in the 1970s pseudo-documentary / *Like to Hurt People*. Driving the car was The Sheiks nephew, whom hardcore fans would soon come to know as Sabu and who was in the background of the wrestling scene.

Goodhart went into Tri-State with a fans enthusiasm for putting together quality shows, but without a clue as to the running of a wrestling company. Some of the big names would even inflate their asking prices when Goodhart called—at least according to the independent wrestling rumor mill—because they were all aware Goodhart did not know any better than to pay those inflated rates.

THE DOWNFALL OF TRI-STATE

Quickly, things fell apart for Goodhart and Tri-State Wrestling. With increasing frequency, Goodhart started promising stars who never appeared, running bloodier and bloodier shows, and getting into battles with his own talent. One involved Missy Hyatt, the blond bombshell who had made a name for herself as a bratty valet in the Von Erich family’s World Class and Bill Watts’ Universal Wrestling Federation in the 1980s. Goodhart and Missy had a shouting match at Tri-State’s May 4, 1991, show, over Goodhart making money by selling pictures of Hyatt at the show without her knowledge.

That May 4 show in Newark also included Gilbert, Abdullah, Bam Bam Bigelow, and Buddy Landel. Goodhart knew Funk was injured and would not be able to wrestle, but continued to advertise him anyway, for all the good it did him. The show drew about 300 fans.

A September 21, 1991, show in Philadelphia drew 1,500 fans, good for $27,900, or triple what WCW drew the last time it ran the same building, but the talent costs were starting to eat Tri-State alive, even though the show featured Sabu, who was rising up the independent ranks. Little-regarded local wrestler The Sandman was also a regular on the cards.

Backstage at Tri-State events, everyone called The Sandman Hak. Funk said he grew to have a lot of respect for the way Jim "The Sandman" Fullington reinvented himself as the "Hardcore Icon" down the road, but said "The Surfing Sandman" left a lot to be desired.

"Yeah, he damn near left me feeling like I'd been beached just watching his match," Funk said, laughing.

In his early wrestling days, The Sandman was far from the dark-clad, chainsmoking, beer-drinking rebel he would become. Although The Sandman name later communicated the bloody concept of a man who would put you to sleep in violent fashion, it originally had a more literal connotation. The Sandman started out as a bleach-blond surfer, an apparent knockoff on Sting, at the time WCWs top babyface. Like Sting, The Sandman entered the ring wearing bright tights, and lively guitar music served as his entrance theme. Ring announcers even introduced him as WCWs did Sting, by saying, "This ... is ... The Sandman!"

And if his thick Philadelphia accent did not seem to jibe with his stated hometown of Venice Beach, California (same as Sting and Hulk Hogan), The Sandman was not deterred. He would ultimately reinvent himself as a blue-collar ass-kicker, who would become one of the areas most popular performers among the hardcore fan base.

The September 21 show was a bloody affair, even by Philadelphia standards. It started in the opening match, a "last blood" battle royale, in which wrestlers were eliminated from the match by bleeding. The only match not to feature crimson was a technical showcase between Owen Hart and New Japan star Takayuki lizuka.

As Tri-State was vying to stay afloat, another small company—Smoky Mountain Wrestling—held its first show about a month later. Smoky Mountain was the brainchild of Jim Cornette, who had made his mark in the

business as a manager. Cornette's approach, however, was the diametric opposite of Tri-State. Although the Philadelphia group aimed for hardcore fans and offered spectacle over storytelling, Smoky Mountain was reminiscent of an old-style territory, although it ended up being a favorite of the hardcores.

By November, Goodhart, problems and all, did not sound like a guy who was going to be out of business within a few months. Goodhart announced his lineup for a January 25, 1992, show, which he promised would feature some of the top stars in wrestling, including the stars of All Japan Pro Wrestling, one of Japans top promotions.

"When Goodhart announced that next show from the lineup, it sounded like an All Japan show," Barnett said. "I knew it would never happen, but I remember thinking if it did, I would definitely make another trip to Philadelphia."

As the wrestling business' "dream match" series of Hulk Hogan-Ric Flair matches drew decent, but disappointing crowds, Goodhart also announced that the upcoming January 25 show would feature another dream match of sorts—71-year-old Buddy Rogers, wrestling's original "Nature Boy" and one of the biggest-drawing heels of all time, would battle "Nature Boy" Buddy Landel, a talented regional star who never seemed to live up to his main-event potential, but remained a favorite of hardcore fans.

The show never happened, and Rogers only outlived Goodhart's promotion by a few weeks. Goodhart also announced his intentions of running five shows in Florida within the space of a month, but they never happened either.

"They promoted that January 25 show right up to the weekend before," said Ernie "Stately Wayne Manor" Santilli, a wrestling magazine columnist and minor wrestling personality. "The boys were still selling people tickets, but I don't think they were scamming anyone. I don't think they knew he was folding."

Goodhart had made a fair amount of money in the insurance business. By the end of 1991, he had torn through just about all of it on the wrestling business. In addition to the cost of the events, Goodhart was also paying money to local sports talk station WIP 610 AM to let him host his weekly wrestling show.

The wrestling magazines had historically lived and died by their photography, but most were barred from WWF events. Goodhart's Tri-State

shows became a favorite of magazine photographers for the sheer amount of star power on display.

“Joels shows had more of a supercard atmosphere,” Manor said. “He’d bring in guys he thought were cool, but they weren’t all wise business moves. The magazine guys loved getting passes there. [Bill] Apter and [George] Napolitano could get great pictures with a million different guys, but everyone knew how expensive the fly-ins were. I mean, why fly in Austin Idol? He had tons of charisma, but he was a Southern star—he didn’t really mean anything in Philadelphia.”

Manor also said that Goodhart was missing out on an easy revenue stream by not videotaping the shows for sale later.

“I asked him why he wasn’t taping this stuff,” Manor said. “He said he was not allowed to, because it was part of the lease agreement, which sounded strange to me.”

In addition to making questionable business calls, Goodhart apparently started getting wrapped up in his own role in the wrestling world, according to some insiders. More than once, Goodhart was seen walking around backstage, shirtless and with a championship belt over his shoulder.

Although there was much a local wrestler could learn from the legends who came in for Tri-State shows, many of the regulars likely had their professional growth stunted by working for so long in an atmosphere where promos were low on the list of priorities.

“You had guys like J.T Smith, who was a great hand in the ring, but he just never learned to talk there, because there was no mike time,” Manor said.

By the end of the year, the writing was on the wall. Tri-State had sold fans packages of season tickets, guaranteeing the most loyal ones the same seats. Fans who had bought these packages still had tickets when Goodhart went under. In the end, they would receive an average of 30 cents on the dollar.

Philadelphia fan John Bailey remembered hearing the news that Tri-State was calling it quits live on Goodhart’s weekly wrestling radio show. He made the announcement about a week before the planned January 25, 1992, show.

“That was also the last time he was doing the radio show, and he told all of the listeners he was done,” Bailey said. “I thought it took a lot of guts to do that.”

Manor said he saw that final broadcast as a moment of venting for the beleaguered promoter.

“Joel started getting kind of frustrated,” Manor said. “That last radio show he was shooting. He wasn’t pleased with the public for not supporting his promotion, and I really can’t blame him—he was out tens of thousands of dollars. He really meant well; he was sincere about putting something on that he as a fan would freak out for. It’s just that when you’re trying to promote, sometimes that just doesn’t work.”

Kevin Sullivan, one of the stars who came to Philadelphia for Goodhart’s shows, said Goodhart was an often-overlooked part of wrestling history.

“It all started with Joel,” Sullivan said. “I always liked him, thought he was a good kid. He must have had some kind of initiative to get started. He ran a good show.”

Sullivan said he seemed to vanish after the end of his Tri-State promotion.

“I never heard from him again after that last show. This is a hard business, and if it isn’t your full-time job, it’s especially difficult. I mean it’s a difficult business anyway, but to try to do it part-time is even harder.”

Barnett echoed Sullivan’s sentiments.

“I think he meant well, but he was also full of shit like every other wrestling promoter,” Barnett said. “You can’t make any money in wrestling if you’re not in it for any long term.”

As Goodhart petered out in early 1992, the person who picked up the pieces and tried to move on was Goodhart’s ring announcer—a man named Tod Gordon.

CHAPTER 2

EASTERN CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING

“We didn’t want to see it die.”

—BOB ARTESE, ECW RING ANNOUNCER

AS IT TURNED OUT Goodhart had not been the only person throwing money into Tri-State, and Tod Gordon had been more than just the guy who introduced the wrestlers.

“Tod had been the ring announcer and silent partner,” Manor said. “Tod told me himself he was a partner.”

Apparently, Gordon was not eager to see his vision of local wrestling die.

Eastern Championship Wrestling was born in Gordon’s Philadelphia office, days after Goodhart folded Tri-State.

“Tod and I had been the ring announcers for Tri-State, and Tod was also one of the investors,” said Bob Artese, longtime ring announcer. “When Tri-State closed up shop, Tod and I kept our friendship going, and we both decided we didn’t want to see it die, so we met at Tod’s office, with Larry Winters and Steve Truitt, and we started ECW that day when we all decided to keep going.”

Winters, one of the Philadelphia-area wrestlers who was a mainstay of Goodhart’s, would become ECW’s first booker, while Truitt would handle the sound, his job with Tri-State. Gordon, the businessman of the group, would continue to be the moneyman and decision-maker.

THE NEW LEAGUE IN TOWN

Gordon's vision was not quite as grandiose as Goodhart's had been. Gordon's promotion, christened Eastern Championship Wrestling, resembled a more traditional vision of an independent wrestling promotion —smaller arenas, mostly local wrestlers, with one or two big names brought in for each show. The origins were apparently too humble for the group to claim once it got "extreme;" ECW announcer Joey Styles, in later years, would make repeated references to ECW starting in 1993, not a year earlier.

Stately Wayne Manor said Gordon was much more discriminating about who he would bring into ECW than Goodhart had been. Sometimes, he was perhaps too picky.

"At one point, I was trying to bring in The Lightning Kid," Manor said. "Tod said, 'That skinny guy will never sell tickets.'"

At the time, Sean "The Lightning Kid" Waltman was the talk of the U.S. independent scene, coming off a high-flying series against fellow Minnesotan Jerry Lynn. He would go on to minor stardom as the 1-2-3 Kid in the WWF, before defecting to WCW in 1996. By 1998, he was X-Pac, a key member of the WWF's "Attitude" era as part of the Degeneration X faction.

Generally, however, Gordons selectiveness was probably a key reason his company survived where Goodhart's could not.

"I always saw Tod Gordon as a more thought-out version of Joel in terms of having a game plan for his promotion," Manor said. "He wasn't going to fall into the same traps."

Early ECW shows in Philadelphia were held at Mike Schmidt's Sports Bar, at Eighth and Market, where the atmosphere was radically different than in the large hall where Goodhart had run shows.

"The club only held about 250 people, and it was a tables-and-chairs setup instead of bleachers," Artese said. "As ECW started getting a little bigger, we moved out of there."

The first ECW champion was Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka, an aerial innovator whose best days were clearly behind him. The top tag-team was the Super Destroyers, crowned champions on June 23, 1992. Behind the masks were Doug Stall and A.J. Fritzoid. If those names don't ring a bell, don't worry—you're not losing your memory. After losing the titles, they briefly feuded with each other and then vanished from the wrestling world.

Longtime wrestling magazine writer Bill Apter said the early days of Eastern Championship Wrestling had obvious influences.

“When Gordon took over, there was a little injection of [1970s and 1980s NWA promoter Jim] Crockett, before ECW became this sort of ‘Can you top this?’ extreme promotion,” Apter said.

As Gordon got the company rolling, Ernie Santilli contacted Gordon about Stately Wayne Manor becoming a manager in ECW. Gordon was not interested, but he had a counteroffer for Manor.

“I knew Tod was using a bunch of [Tri-State] guys: Rockin Rebel, Johnny Hotbody, Tony Stetson, who were all decent quality independent guys, a lot of guys I felt like I could work with,” Manor said. “Gordon told me there were no spots to be manager, but ECW was going to start on TV, and how would I like to do color commentary? When I got there, there were already really too many managers. This guy might be a manager because he does photography, and that guy might get to be a manager because he helped with something else behind the scenes. I felt some of them weren’t managers who really had any business being managers, which was pretty common among independent promotions.”

ECW’s first television announcer was Dick Graham, an announcing veteran who had called matches with the WWF broadcast crew when the Philadelphia cable network Prism broadcasted Philadelphia Spectrum cards.

Graham, who did not seem to know what to make of the ECW product and only lasted a few weeks, was replaced by former *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* writer Bob Smith, who left after a short stint as well.

Another short-lived commentator was Stevie Wonderful, who had worked on the lower half of ECW cards, before Gordon tapped him to try his hand at color commentary. Only a few weeks into his stint, however, he was apparently fired on the air. Paul Heyman, in his “Paul E. Dangerously” persona, joined Wonderful at the announcer’s position and invited him to “go to the back and let a professional show you how its done.”

And that was the last ECW fans saw or heard of Stevie Wonderful, who had also worked backstage, helping to coordinate events by doing grunt-level logistics. According to ECW insiders from that period, he had even turned down a job working in a similar capacity in WCW in order to remain loyal to ECW.

The game of musical chairs centered around the announcer booth would continue for more than a year before the June 1993 arrival of a *Pro*

Wrestling Illustrated intern named Joseph Bonsignore, who would become better known as Joey Styles. Styles would ultimately play a huge role in ECW's acceptance among hardcore fans with his enthusiasm, his seeming knowledge of every hold and maneuver, his sprinkling of insider terms and humor, and his turning a horrified "Oh my God!" into a catchphrase.

Although ECW seemed to be on firm footing with Gordon's business sense and the initial run of shows, it was evident to those behind the scenes that Gordon was not exactly a student of the wrestling business.

"No, I didn't get the impression he was one of the guys who was trading for Japanese tapes," Manor said, laughing. "We had a guy do a leg lariat, and I called it, and Gordon just marked out on it."

Gordon also lacked some understanding as to how to deal with wrestling's veterans.

"I also think he was a little naive as to how the business as a whole went," Manor said. "Tod wanted to book and not be very predictable, so he would have Terry Taylor fly in and put Tony Stetson over. Well, that was unpredictable, but it doesn't earn you a lot of points with the fly-in crew. I mean you don't fly Steve 'Dr. Death' Williams in and say, 'Doc, we're gonna have you do *a job* (wrestling lingo for taking a fall and losing the match) for the Mulkeys.'"

CHAOS REINS IN THE WRESTLING WORLD

As ECW began its existence, the wrestling world was in a state of upheaval. By late 1992, the federal government was investigating claims of steroid distribution within the WWF. Company owner Vince McMahon was looking at the possibility of federal charges. As this was going on, the most pumped-up physiques in the company started to vanish. By the end of 1992, musclemen Hulk Hogan, Davey Boy Smith, Sid Justice (better known as Sid Vicious in WCW), and the Ultimate Warrior were all out of the WWF. Replacing them in main events were the smaller Bret Hart and Shawn Michaels, among others. Hart and Michaels provided more fast-paced athletic action than what WWF fans were used to, but crowds shrank as did the muscle mass of the top wrestlers in the company.

In WCW, Bill Watts had taken over the post once held by Herd, after a brief stint by executive K. Allen Frey. Watts had not watched wrestling in the five years since he had sold the Universal Wrestling Federation and quickly found himself hamstrung by corporate politics, which left him unable to run the company without interference. In both the WWF and WCW, crowds were dwindling to embarrassing lows.

But this wrestling recession was not worldwide. In Japan, more than a dozen companies were thriving, led by the straight wrestling of All Japan Pro Wrestling and the spectacular performances in New Japan Pro Wrestling.

Also in Japan, a new phenomenon was underway, which had its roots in an incident more than a decade earlier when young Japanese star Atsushi Onita shattered his knee in 1983—not in a match, but in jumping out of the ring after his win. All Japan Pro Wrestling owner Shohei “Giant” Baba had been grooming Onita to become a bigger star, but Baba let Onita go after the injury.

Onita had spent some time with wrestling legend Terry Funk, who got Onita and Masa Fuchi work in the Memphis wrestling territory. Until McMahon took the WWF national in the 1980s, the wrestling industry in the United States comprised dozens of regional circuits, each with its own distinctive flavor. The flavor in Memphis was wild—shows in the territory frequently contained gimmick matches and fast-paced brawls. Onita himself, along with Fuchi, had been in a match in Tupelo, Mississippi, against Ricky Morton and Eddie Gilbert that ended with the two teams brawling all over the arena and ultimately pelting each other with whatever they could get their hands on. The match became known as the second “Tupelo Concession Stand Brawl,” because the four men ended up covered in blood and condiments.

Onita remembered how hot the Southern crowds had been when he created his own wrestling company, Frontier Martial-Arts Wrestling, in 1990. Many of FMWs shows, particularly the major ones, featured barbed wire, fire, explosives, or some combination thereof. But the major drawing point appeared to be the uniquely charismatic Onita, and on September 19, 1992, 30,000 people came to Kawasaki Stadium to see Onita take on Tiger Jeet Singh in a barbed wire-landmine match. Also on the card was a young man who was making a big name for himself in the States as a high-flying daredevil and who was doing things in the ring no one had ever seen before.

His name was Terry Brunk, but wrestling fans knew him as Sabu, and his suicidal flying made him a rare case—a guy who was becoming a huge star in independent wrestling, despite having no “name” from being a WWF or WCW star.

INDEPENDENT AND LOVING IT

As for ECW itself, it plunked along, using veterans like Jimmy Snuka and Don Muraco, as well as inexperienced locals, such as The Sandman. ECW was drawing crowds that generally ranged from 200 to 500 people, fairly typical for an independent group, but nothing to suggest that one of the most influential wrestling entities of a generation was in its infancy.

Snuka started off in ECW as a babyface, playing off his WWF fame, but turned *heel*—or bad guy—attacking and laying out Gordon in the process. Stately Wayne Manor, who was conducting the interview in which the attack occurred, said he was encouraged to forego the speaking part he had planned.

“Snuka was going to go to the top for his big splash onto Tod, and he turned to me and snarled, ‘You’d better get out of the ring,’” Manor said. “I didn’t know if he was serious or just saying it for the audience’s benefit, but then he said it again louder. Who was I to argue?”

Manor said it was around that time that he noticed a change in Gordon, who was transforming from a man who only wanted to promote a small viable wrestling company into a man who was using his promotion as a vehicle to get himself over.

“Right toward the end of my tenure there, Tod was getting more involved in his own appearances before each show,” Manor said. “He had started out not being swallowed by that star mentality, but he turned into every other wrestling promoter, who had to be a star on his own show. I would joke that ‘ECW’ stood for ‘Ego Case Wrestling.’”

FOR FANS ONLY

Many ECW fans would likely not recognize John Bailey without the straw hat he wore as he sat in the front row of nearly every ECW Arena show.

Baileys days as a fan date back to the WWF shows in the Philadelphia Spectrum of the mid-1980s. He was a regular at Joel Goodhart's events and started attending ECW shows even before the company landed in New Alahambra, the hall that would become known as the ECW Arena.

"Tod's early shows didn't rely as much on big names as the Joel Goodhart shows had," Bailey said. "Tod had his local regulars, like the Super Destroyers, J.T. Smith, and Tony Stetson. He'd bring in a big name every now and then, but it felt like the place was magical then, like everything just worked."

Bailey said the fan base's number might have been limited, but those who became regulars came to see themselves as part of the show. That was a trait that never seemed to change throughout ECW's nine-year life, particularly at the ECW Arena.

"The fans were just as important as the wrestlers," Bailey said. "There was this great feeling at those shows, like it was a family reunion that was held once a month."

After attending his first ECW shows as a paying customer, Bailey ended up making a deal with Tod Gordon that continued under Paul Heyman in later years. ECW put Bailey to work, and Bailey would never pay for his front-and-center seat again.

"Bob Artese was doing the ring announcing the first or second time I went to an ECW show, and he said he'd talk to Tod, see what they could do," Bailey said.

Bailey and his brother would set up chairs around the ring, in exchange for comped tickets on the front row.

"And so, for seven years, I did that," he said. "Also, I started taking tickets at the side door, but that was later, about a year or so."

Bailey became a front-row fixture and a visible, vocal part of ECW's shows for the life of the promotion. He said he never thought about what to shout, or whom to shout at beforehand. He also became a favorite target for many of ECW's heels over the years.

"I would just shout out whatever popped into my mind," he said. "They knew they could shove at me a little bit, spit at me. So many people

were sue-happy, but I went along with anything. They knew they could get the crowd going that way, and they knew they could get away with it."

CHAPTER 3

HOT STUFF

“Eddie Gilbert was my brother”

—TOD GORDON AT THE NWA 50TH ANNIVERSARY BANQUET IN 1998

LARRY WINTERS’ BOOKING OF ECW’S EARLIEST SHOWS was perfectly competent, but his “old-school” attitude contrasted sharply with Gordon’s radical ideas, and Gordon ultimately made the call to replace him with someone new.

“Larry really got phased out with Tod taking over, because he started booking a little and got pretty good at it quickly,” Bob Artese said. “Then Tod got to the point where he realized he needed someone who really had some contacts and know-how, and that’s when he brought in Eddie Gilbert.”

As ECW entered its second year, the turmoil gripping the rest of the U.S. wrestling scene remained. In January, Bill Watts fired Paul Heyman from WCW. Watts accused Heyman of falsifying expense reports, but Heyman told Charleston, South Carolina’s *The Post and Courier* that the firing had more to do with him refusing to renegotiate his six-figure contract. Heymans stock had seemingly plummeted since his return alongside Rick Rude. Within a month, Watts himself would be gone from WCW.

As for ECW, the company had not exactly been making waves. For all of the buzz ECW was generating in the northeastern U.S. independent scene, it was a promotion that averaged less than a show every two weeks during its first year. ECW was not a significant entity in the wrestling world —it was a local group that barely registered in a business sense.

ECW kicked off 1993 with one of the bigger crowds in its history, 670 fans, for *Battle of the Belts*, a show pitting ECW stars against wrestlers with area promoter Dennis Coraluzzo’s World Wrestling Association.

The union’s announcement surprised many of those who knew both men and knew of their enmity for one another. Coraluzzo’s problems with Gordon predated ECW altogether. Originally, Coraluzzo’s heat was with

Joel Goodhart in the Tri-State Wrestling days. While Goodhart was running his infrequent "supershows," Coraluzzo and Larry Sharpe (area wrestler/trainer/promoter whose pupils included Bam Bam Bigelow) ran more consistent shows, but on a smaller scale.

"When it came to the proverbial bottom line, Dennis and Larry ran shows to turn a profit," Stately Wayne Manor said. "Unlike Joel Goodhart, they weren't running events to showcase how many famous people they could bring in.

For his part, Sharpe prided himself on running clean shows, carried a great deal of respect within the wrestling business, and wanted nothing to do with the burgeoning pissing match between Gordon and Coraluzzo.

When Gordons ECW picked up some of the pieces of Tri-State, the tension with Coraluzzo seemed to transfer from Goodhart to Gordon, and they battled over dates and some wrestlers.

"I suspect they both wanted to be the king of the hill in Philadelphia," Manor said. "They had some healthy ego battles, but it was all really kind of silly."

Manor was one of the few people who worked for both men at the same time. He said the two men had approaches that were as different as night and day.

"There was a weird dichotomy between Tod and Dennis," Manor said. "Tod was more the polite businessman, and he was pretty low key. Dennis was the stereotypical, emotional Italian guy, and that's not a knock, because I'm one of them, too. Dennis was more animated backstage."

Coraluzzo was able to co-exist with Goodhart though, because each ran shows using his own crew with few intermingling. Gordon's feud with Coraluzzo seemed more personal and seemed to grow even as the two sides began in 1993, taking steps toward copromoting an event.

One of the lowlights of the show was the unadvertised appearance of Kerry "Von Erich" Adkisson. Von Erich had been one of the biggest wrestling stars of the early 1980s, either with his brothers against the Freebirds or alone and facing NWA world champion Rie Flair. By 1993, his family's promotion was finished, and his drug use had made him almost impossible to employ in the wrestling business even though he was well liked.

Was Adkisson under the influence on January 23, 1993, the night of *Battle of the Belts?* Who could say? What people in the locker room that

night do remember is Adkisson was manager Woman's "secret" weapon against "Wildman" Sal Bellomo, an opening-match guy in the WWF a decade earlier, who had found a new lease on life in ECW.

To maximize the surprise factor, Adkisson was to wear a mask to the ring, so that his unveiling would elicit a shocked reaction from the crowd. Adkisson knew the plan, so it was a surprise when he prepared to walk out for his match, wearing a ring jacket with "Kerry" emblazoned on the back.

Someone backstage caught him before he headed down the aisle and got him to take off the jacket. Adkisson walked a few steps toward the ramp before he turned around, grabbed the jacket—as if he realized he had forgotten to wear it, and put it back on, apparently completely forgetting both the booking plan and his earlier removal of it.

Needless to say, Adkissons mask was not enough to leave the fans questioning whom they were seeing. Sadly, Adkissons surprise-ruining entrance was more memorable than the match that followed. Even more sadly, the match would be Adkisson's last. The onetime top star in wrestling had been on probation for drug possession and was on the verge of having that probation revoked after getting caught with drugs again. On February 18, 1993, days before his scheduled probation-revocation hearing, Adkisson borrowed a pistol from his dad (legendary wrestler Fritz Von Erich), went out into the woods near his dad's home, and shot himself in the chest.

Another troubled young wrestler made his first appearance on an ECW show that night. Like Kerry Von Erich, "Hot Stuff" Eddie Gilbert was a second-generation wrestler. Gilbert had been a mainstay on the independent wrestling circuit since his departure from WCW in 1989. Carrying on a feud that had made its rounds in independent wrestling promotions, Gilbert battled Terry Funk that night.

As he did when he was making his Goodhart appearances, Funk flew across the country to appear at the Philadelphia show. At that point, Funk was spending most of his time in California, trying to earn his status as a member of the Screen Actors Guild. Funk said he saw a huge difference between the fledgling promotion and Goodhart's Tri-State group.

"When I first went into that area, I knew Tri-State wasn't anything that was going to last," Funk said. "That was just a guy trying to put good matches together from the past. When Eddie Gilbert went into the ECW situation, that was a matter of a bunch of guys nobody knew, who weren't very damn good. *Zero* experience, and if they did have experience, it was

from God only knows where. And a lot of those guys ended up reinventing themselves and doing pretty well for themselves, so the talent might have been there, but it sure wasn't showing that particular night. It just seemed like some conglomerate show, where Joe and Fred came in off the street and said they wanted to wrestle, so they got put into the ring. I mean *somebody* booked the damn thing, but no one was claiming credit for it. Hell, I'd like to know myself, who booked that show."

Gilbert had been a key player for Coraluzzo, and his defection to Gordons Eastern Championship Wrestling group after that show only added to the hard feelings between the two promoters.

Gilbert got some notice for his creativity in booking Bill Watts' UWF group in 1987 and Alabama's Continental Wrestling promotion a year later. Already known for his keen booking sense and volatile personality, in 1991 he made his mark on Philadelphia's hardcore fan base in a memorable feud with Cactus Jack that was one of the high points of Joel Goodhart's Tri-State Wrestling Alliance. The booker was the person who decided who wrestled whom and who won and lost.

Bob Barnett, who became friends with Gilbert after conducting a videotaped *shoot* interview with him, said he thought Gilbert's chances of making a go at it with ECW were better than the more grandiose Goodhart's had been, particularly with Gordon to rein in some of his wilder ideas.

"I didn't think Eddie would book it like Goodhart did," Barnett said. "Eddie was a great guy, but as a booker, he did need someone to control him."

Gilbert would soon be booking ECW, whose style soon started to resemble that of Memphis wrestling, on which Gilbert had been raised.

THE NEXT PHASE OF ECW

ECW moved into the bigger time with its first television show on March 12, 1993. Jimmy Snuka won a tournament for the vacant ECW TV title at a show in Radnor, Pennsylvania. By April 1993, ECW was running weekly TV shows on Sports Channel Philadelphia, but was still not setting attendance records—the TV title tournament show drew 250 fans.

Under Gilbert, ECW showcased tight booking and a greater emphasis on continuing storylines.

“Eddie booked himself in main events, but he didn’t hog the show,” fan John Bailey said.

Gilbert made a lot of personnel changes in short order, both in the ring and behind the scenes.

“People showed up [for the show], thinking they were still part of ECW, but they weren’t,” Manor said. “Not anymore.”

Making it worse was the weather—many of the wrestlers had fought through a blizzard to get to the arena only to find they were not on the schedule.

Gilbert, who idolized Jerry Lawler in Memphis, crowned himself “King of Philadelphia” and brought in family and former associates to bolster the ranks of ECW.

“It was pretty apparent Gilbert saw ECW as his opportunity to turn Philadelphia into Memphis North with himself as Lawler,” Manor said.

In the ring, Gilbert reprised one of his seemingly favorite tricks—a heel stable he led as “Hot Stuff International.” This incarnation included Snuka and “Magnificent” Don Muraco, another WWF star of days gone by. Another member was “The Dark Patriot,” a masked wrestler who was created to be the nemesis of The Patriot, the lead babyface in the Global Wrestling Federation. (Global had started in 1990, amid ostentatious claims of a $25 million backer from Nigeria, but turned out to be little more than a Texas indie group that inherited a TV slot on ESPN. In fairness, Global did expose fans nationwide to some very talented pro wrestlers, in particular Jerry Lynn and Sean “The Lightning Kid” Waltman.) Behind the mask was Doug Gilbert, Eddie’s brother.

ENTER PAUL HEYMAN

Secure in his power as booker, top heel, and “King of Philadelphia,” Gilbert brought in a longtime friend to help out behind the scenes and work as a ringside manager.

Shortly thereafter, Hot Stuff International also came to include Paul "Paul E. Dangerously" Heyman as his manager.

Heyman had spent a couple of months on the periphery of the wrestling world after being fired by WCW head Bill Watts in 1993. Heymans tenure at WCW had been anything but smooth. In late 1991 he was indefinitely suspended by WCW executive vice president Jim Herd. Heyman, a manager in WCW, was accused of leaking plans for a match between WCW champion Lex Luger and United States Wrestling Association champion Jerry Lawler. However, by mid-October, wile Heyman was threatening WCW with legal action, he ended up making a splash with his return at the *Halloween Havoc* pay-per-view on October 27, 1991, when he debuted as the manager of newcomer "Ravishing" Rick Rude. Rude had been a top heel for the WWF for the past few years before leaving in a pay dispute.

While Heyman worked as an on-air personality for ECW, he was working behind the scenes in another endeavor. Jim Crockett, who inherited the Mid-Atlantic territory in the 1970s and led the main opposition to Vince McMahons WWF expansion in the 1980s, had sold his promotion to Turner Broadcasting System in 1988. Crockett's group had held the NWA name that once represented a coalition of promoters worldwide and offered a more serious wrestling product as counterprogramming to the WWF. Through a combination of his own ineptness, the booking of Dusty Rhodes (who was a short-term success, but was rehashing tired ideas by the end of his booking stint), and the vicious tactics of McMahon, Crockett found himself going out of business. However, TBS valued wrestling as cheap programming that delivered ratings, and Crockett was able to sell to the network itself. Part of the deal included a no-compete clause. As that clause was expiring in 1993, Crockett was readying his return to the wrestling business with a venture called the World Wrestling Network.

The network was to feature Road Warrior Hawk, Jake "The Snake" Roberts, and other big names not locked up by WCW or the WWF. It was also to feature the booking of Heyman. However, the group kept postponing its TV tapings and shows, and Heymans side-gig of ECW was seemingly becoming the steadier workplace.

Before Crockett had contacted him, Heyman had been planning on getting out of wrestling entirely. After his bitter departure from WCW in January 1993, Heyman was negotiating to become a radio personality in

New York. He was apparently so determined to leave wrestling that he turned down an offer from McMahon to work in the WWF.

Crockett's offer was apparently too much for Heyman to resist, however, because it included the chance to do something Heyman had always wanted, but had never gotten to do—be the booker. So he waited for Crockett's call and bided his time in ECW.

AT HOME IN PHILLY

On May 14, 1993, Mike "Hawk" Hegstrand also debuted for ECW at Viking Hall, the bingo hall that had already become known as the ECW Arena. He had been one half of The Road Warriors, one of the top tag teams of the 1980s, but with his partner Joe "Animal" Laurinatus out of commission with a back injury, Hawk was balancing his time between U.S. independents and Japan, where he teamed with Kensuke Sasaki as "The Hell Raisers."

That same night might have seen the birth of the "Holy shit!" chant that would become a staple of ECW crowds for years to come. It came during a match between The Dark Patriot and J.T. Smith when the two brawled from the ring to the TV platform. The Dark Patriot hit Smith, knocking him 15 feet onto the floor. The masked man then dove onto Smith, leaving both men splattered on the arena floor. As spectacular a stunt as this was, it was just a precursor of things to come.

The Memphis influence was growing in ECW when Gilbert brought in Kevin Lawler, son of Jerry "The King," to work as referee Kevin Christian and also to work in the office.

ECW, now armed with the intent to run regular house shows in the Philadelphia area, had a better sense of direction than it had in its short life to this point, but the rest of the American wrestling scene remained in disarray. Here's a snapshot, to give you an idea of the sorry state of the business. In May 1993, three independent wrestling shows in Texas drew 11, 12, and 18 fans respectively. In the WWF, a noticeably less monstrous Hulk Hogan had toppled Yokozuna to regain the WWF title in what would be his last run for a decade, as the WWF grasped at straws, trying to find

something that would draw fans. Before long, the company would fail miserably at attempting to recreate Hogan by turning muscleman Lex Luger into an “Ail-American hero,” even as McMahon prepared to go to trial on charges of steroid distribution. WCW, with all of the might of Turner Broadcasting that should have been at its disposal, was drawing so poorly that ECW’s June 19, 1993, show brought in more money than WCW’s last show in the Philadelphia area. WCW’s next big venture was to hold 12 weeks’ worth of TV tapings in a single weekend at Disney World in Florida.

ECW’s top feud was between Gilbert and Terry Funk, who performed for ECW in between his tours of Japan, where the 28-year veteran and former world champion had reinvented himself for what seemed like the umpteenth time into an aging gunslinger known as The Hardcore Legend. Funk’s exploding ring match with Atsushi Onita drew 41,000 people to Kawasaki Stadium. On a June 1993 show, Gilbert beat Funk in the match that resulted in Gilbert being crowned King of Philadelphia. The same show got Gordon and company into some hot water, as valet Angel was stripped topless in the ring during a brawl. Gordon insisted to reporters, the public, and state athletic commissioners, who were less than pleased with the revealing development, that he did not know the flash of nudity was coming and that it was inadvertent. Just about no one believed him. Whatever pleas he made must have worked, because ECW kept going and stayed in the ECW Arena.

And Gilbert became even more involved, becoming 49 percent owner by July 1993. He ran an angle where he confronted Philadelphia Eagles player Ron Jaworski, but nothing came of it.

Meanwhile, Crockett’s WWN venture was off to a rocky start, as a planned TV taping in Killeen, Texas, turned into a live event, but not filmed. The relationship between Heyman and Jim Crockett was about to have a major impact on ECW.

SHANE

Perhaps the most important debut was that of Shane Douglas on an August 8, 1993, TV taping. Troy “Shane Douglas” Martin, a longtime babyface, became a solid heel, associating himself with Hot Stuff International. Not yet “The Franchise,” Douglas became “Fabulous” Shane Douglas, yet another rehash of the Memphis scene. (“Fabulous” Jackie Fargo was the city’s all-time wrestling hero before Jerry “The King” Lawler.)

Douglas was a handsome blonde athlete with a world of potential that had never been tapped. His most recent stint, teaming with Ricky Steamboat in WCW, had left him disillusioned about the wrestling business.

“At that point, I was ready to quit, I was so disenfranchised, no pun intended,” Douglas said.

Douglas had gotten injured, and WCW had put Steamboat and him under masks, as a gimmick, but then put other wrestlers under the mask in Douglas’ spot while he was out.

“The problem was my physique wasn’t anything like Tom Zenk’s or Brad Armstrong’s,” Douglas said. “And being the consummate professional he was, Steamboat would make sure the fans saw under his mask, after each match, so they’d know it was him, but his partner couldn’t unmask, because then the fans would know it wasn’t me. It made WCW look bad to pull something like that, but it also made me look bad, like I was a party to it.”

Douglas quit WCW and was planning on staying out of wrestling altogether, deciding instead to make a living teaching.

“I’d been in it for seven or eight years, and it seemed like the more I was in the business, the more I disliked it,” Douglas said. “I finally just said, ‘You know what? You can have this business of backstabbing and bullshit.’”

And then Gilbert started calling. In 1987, Gilbert had given Douglas his first big break, when Gilbert was booking the Universal Wrestling Federation, just before Bill Watts sold the company to Crockett Promotions. A year later, Gilbert brought Douglas into Continental, the Alabama promotion where Gilbert also worked extensively with Heyman.

“I wasn’t even returning calls from people in wrestling, but anytime Eddie called, I took the call,” Douglas said. “But I had convinced myself I didn’t want to wrestle anymore, so every time he called, I would just say, ‘Thanks, but no thanks.’ He kept calling back, offering more money each time. I said it wasn’t about the money.”

When Gilbert called and offered Douglas a spot as a top heel in ECW, Douglas became interested, seeing it as a chance to learn how to handle the other side of the performance end of wrestling.

"I figured, 'Fuck it, I'll go in, have some fun, and maybe learn something along the way,'" Douglas said. "I thought that was a bold idea Eddie had, because heels didn't look like me—young, fresh-faced, blonde hair and blue eyes."

Douglas said that working as a heel was indeed a learning experience for him. Among other things, he had to learn to call the match in the ring (which means he had to whisper the clues to his opponent to dictate what happened in a match and to determine the pace), a responsibility he'd never had before.

"I was really fortunate to be working with Terry Funk at that point, because he was able to fill in the blanks for me," Douglas said. "I ended up learning a tremendous amount."

GILBERT TAKES A WALK

The Douglas–Gilbert alliance would not last long—not because of any action by Douglas, but because Eddie Gilbert was on his way out.

A battery of factors played into the ECW-Gilbert split. Only a few months after Paul Heyman had started in ECW, he and Gilbert had disagreements that ultimately destroyed their friendship.

"Eddie and Paul had been close for a long time, and Paul would come to the shows as a favor to Eddie, to help out," Bob Artese said. "I never knew exactly what happened between them, but obviously there was a major falling out. There were a lot of rumors."

Among their differences were content disagreements, and Gordon reportedly saw Heyman as the man with a new direction, while Gilbert was preaching tradition.

"Eddie wanted control, and Paul wanted to go in a different direction," said ECW website designer Brett Schwan. "Eddie wanted ECW to be more of a Memphis-style promotion, and Paul wanted to go the more extreme direction."

Others who were friends to both men said the move was less a philosophical difference than a power play.

“It all came down to power,” Funk said. “Paul wanted to be the boss. He wanted Gilbert’s job. You know, Paul E. wanted to be in wrestling from the time he was a young boy, but his dream was not to be world champion—he wanted to rule the world, the way Vince McMahon had done in the 1980s. As ECW emerged though years later, I think he got to where he would have been satisfied with coexistence.”

Another person close to Gilbert said Gilbert had privately felt as if Heyman, his longtime friend, had buried a knife in his back.

Still others saw that Gilbert appeared to be struggling with a drug problem that affected his ability to relate to people.

People close to Gordon said that Gilbert had made brazen plays for Gordons wife, and that Gordon eventually came to see that Gilbert was working him for all Hot Stuff could get. In one instance, Gilbert hit up Gordon for a raise, telling Gordon he was basically giving the ECW owner a chance to match an offer from promoter Jim Crockett, who he said had offered to make Gilbert the booker of WWN. When Gordon asked Crockett associate Heyman about Crockett’s timetable for bringing in Gilbert to book, Heyman informed Gordon that Crockett already had a booker—Heyman himself. Gordon had given Gilbert a raise of nearly 20 percent to counter an offer that had never been made.

The truth was Gilbert wanted nothing to do with Crockett, a feeling that became another major factor in his departure. Gilbert had been less than enamored with Crockett since 1987, when Crockett bought Bill Watts’ UWF group and promptly allowed most of its stars to be booked into oblivion.

According to people in ECW at the time, Gordon appeared to grow even more disenchanted with Gilbert after talking to Kevin Lawler. Lawler had participated in a creative angle that culminated in his in-ring split with Gilbert’s group. When Gordon praised Gilbert’s creative angle to Lawler, the son of Memphis’ “King” told him it wasn’t Gilbert who had come up with the innovative angle—it had been Heyman.

The NWA promoters held a convention in September 1993, and Heyman attended on behalf of Crockett. Crockett and the NWA were counting on a new member—ECW.

That news was too much for Eddie Gilbert, who'd had nothing but bad dealings with Crockett in the past. Gilbert and Gordon split ties. Gordon was anticipating becoming the northeastern promoter for Crockett, while Gilbert refused to work for Crockett.

Gilbert and Gordon ended up airing their grievances with each other in front of several ECW wrestlers. The profanity-filled shouting match would be their last discussion as partners.

A little more than a week before ECW's biggest show to date, *UltraClash*, Gilbert quit, selling his ownership back to Gordon. Only six months after his arrival in ECW, Hot Stuff was gone.

Ilion, New York, resident Don Laible was a friend of Gilbert's, going back to when both were teens, photographing matches ringside. He said Heyman and Gordon squeezed Gilbert out of ECW.

"Tod started ECW because he had the money and wanted to be a 'somebody,'" Laible said. "And Paul E. always knew how to promote Paul E. When he talked to you, he could make you feel like you were the greatest thing since sliced bread. Eddie had taken care of him in Continental [the Alabama territory where they first worked together extensively in 1988], but they were in Philadelphia, [and] Paul E. knew the area, and he could manipulate to get where he wanted to."

Kevin Sullivan replaced Gilbert as Abdullah the Butchers *UltraClash* partner against Terry Funk and Stan Hansen, and replacing Gilbert as ECW booker was Gilbert's longtime associate Paul Heyman, a fact that irked Gilbert.

Shane Douglas said the change was abrupt, but he also said Heyman kept the ball rolling.

"It was like, one week Eddie was there, and the next, he wasn't," Douglas said. "It was pretty seamless when it happened, because Paul had basically been Eddie's assistant booker."

Douglas also credited Heyman with having the mind for talent that could take ECW to a higher level as a promotion.

"Eddie had been doing something that was pretty good in ECW, but he was using a lot of cheap locals, and they weren't going to be taking us to the next level," Douglas said. "Paul was instrumental in bringing in talent that blew away what any other independent group had to offer."

UltraClash drew a standing-room-only ECW-record crowd of 1,131 fans and a $16,147 gate. However, there were a couple of missteps. First,

ECW champion Tito Santana would not be coming back to work for the group, so Gordon, now playing the role of ECW commissioner in front of the cameras, announced Shane Douglas as the new champion.

“I think they said it happened in Harrisburg,” Douglas said. “I’m not sure why he didn’t drop the belt in the ring, whether it was scheduling or a money issue, but I doubt it was his reluctance to do a job, because Tito has always been very, very professional about that.”

ECW’s infrequent schedule made the announcement an easy one.

“They were only running once a month then,” said ringside photographer George Tahinos, “so it was easy to say a title change had happened in South America or wherever.”

And Gilbert had one more appearance to make. He had been at *UltraClash* all night, sitting at a table, selling merchandise and autographs. Ultimately, he broke up the match in which he had originally been scheduled to wrestle by attacking Terry Funk. Gilbert then gave a farewell speech, telling the fans to continue supporting ECW despite his departure. He said he was leaving amicably, never saying that his departure was linked to another announcement made on the show—Gordon’s announcement that ECW would become a part of the new NWA. It was a speech Gordon later said he never knew was coming.

On his way to the back, he shook hands and thanked people, and Gilbert even made a point to say thanks to the photographers one last time before he left.

“He thanked us for all our support and all we had done, and he shook our hands,” Tahinos said. “Ill never forget it. I had always been a mark for Eddie Gilbert, but him going out of his way to do that was really something.”

A couple of weeks later, Gilbert wrote a letter to the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter,* explaining his motivations and noting the loss of his years-long friendship with Heyman. The letter appeared in the October 11, 1993, edition of the newsletter.

“I did in fact resign from ECW when I got the information that we would be working together with Jim Crockett,” he wrote. “The date of my resignation was September *7*, the same day I got the news about the so-called merger. I really felt it wasn’t in our best interest at ECW to give away any momentum we had started to someone else who didn’t have anything to offer us in return. The actions that transpired after that date, especially on

the 9/18 card, cost me the closest friendship I've ever maintained in this business. I gave the speech 'that no one knew about' because I was worried how my departure would be handled. I really just wanted to leave with my head held high."

Beyond the sentiments in that letter, Gilbert declined to publicly blast either Heyman or Gordon.

"Eddie wouldn't badmouth anyone," Bob Barnett said. "Even when I talked to him privately, he would always sugarcoat everything. That was one smart thing about him. He knew not to burn bridges, because he might end up working for the people who fucked him over again, sometime down the line."

He wouldn't get the chance. Gilbert returned to Tennessee, where he did some wrestling for Jerry Lawler's promotion (the last survivor of the old territories). In 1994, Gilbert made a stab at a life outside of wrestling, running for county clerk in his native Tennessee. When he lost the election, he returned to wrestling and was found dead in a Puerto Rico hotel room on February 18, 1995. He was 33.

"He loved wrestling," Barnett said. "He loved getting heat. He loved to tell stories about the times in Memphis they had to get him out of the fairgrounds in the trunk of a car, because people hated him so much."

CHAPTER 4

RAISING THE BAR (AND SLAMMING IT THOUGH THE TABLE)

“We are going to bring you people more voilence than the United States Figure Skating Association!”

–PAUL HEYMAN ON ECW TELEVISION JANUARY 1994

WITH A NEW BOOKER and a new NWA affiliation, ECW was in for a major shift in direction. Heyman immediately made his influence plain, both on the creative side and in the business end.

Heyman’s influence was evident with the first match of *UltraClash*, the very first show that Heyman booked. That match featured Ian Rotten and Jason McKnight against a debuting tag team: Paul Heymans first major contribution to ECW, “Flyboy” Rocco Rock and Johnny Grunge—The Public Enemy.

Michael “Johnny Grunge” Durham and Ted “Rocco Rock” Petty had both worked for years in independent promotions, Petty longer than Durham. Despite The Public Enemy’s hip-hop gimmick combined with their ultra-violent style, they were not immediate favorites.

Over the next few months, however, they won over most of the crowd through their creatively violent use of tables. It was plain to see the team owed much of its success to Sabu, who had been the primary innovator of table usage in wrestling matches, but The Public Enemy took tables a step further, by incorporating flying moves and teamwork to put people through wooden tables in ways one man could not.

The Public Enemy was also the act that broke down the wall between ECW wrestlers and ECW fans. The inspiration for the act came from pop culture, which would influence much of Heymans booking. In the early 1990s, hip-hop music was getting into the mainstream. Also seemingly in vogue was a sense of cynicism among the nations youth, reflected in a *Newsweek* magazine article that called the teens and 20-somethings the first generation of youth to be more afraid of living than dying.

In the face of all this world-weariness and angst, wrestling promoters were still using fluffy guitar music as ring entrance themes, seemingly unable to move out of their 1980s stupor. Heyman envisioned a tag team that would represent the disaffected youth known as Generation X. He had known Ted Petty for years from Petty's work as a high flier on the independent scene, first as Leopard Mask—a blatant takeoff on Japans pioneering acrobat Tiger Mask—and later as The Cheetah Kid. By the early 1990s, Petty was ready to get out of wrestling, because he had never received an opportunity at stardom that was even close to being commensurate with his obvious talent.

Heyman recast Petty as "Flyboy" Rocco Rock, a sort of play on rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg's name. His partner would be Petty's longtime independent foe, Johnny Rotten. Heyman believed that name was too reminiscent of the Sex Pistols frontman of a generation earlier. Heyman rechristened him Johnny Grunge.

Together they played over-the-top, ridiculous characters, except that they delivered some of the most poignant messages to be found in wrestling promos. They ended their first promo by explaining how their buffoonish characters were not really funny at all.

The Public Enemy, presenting themselves as street toughs, told the fans, "We're not doing this to entertain you. We're doing this to entertain ourselves, because where we come from, laughs are hard to come by. If we get locked up, at least we know we'll get three squares a day."

Few wrestling fans knew what to make of two burly men, dressed like Kriss Kross, delivering social messages, but the trend continued. The team ended every promo with some similarly twisted-yet-poignant message. Helping the gimmick was the fact that Grunge was hardly known outside of hardcore independent fans, and practically no one in fandom had seen Petty without a mask, which allowed Heyman to foster the doubt that hey, maybe these guys were from the streets. In the ring, they would battle in bloodbath after bloodbath, telling fans that although The Public Enemy might be entertaining characters, they would fight like hell when they were in the ring.

"In a way, The Public Enemy started the whole crowd participation thing," fan John Bailey said. "I remember one of their first matches when someone in the crowd handed them a frying pan, and they used it."

Another of Heymans first moves was to spread ECW into surrounding areas. Heyman was the one who led the push to get the promotion on New York's MSG Network, among other TV outlets.

Heyman's booking featured some of the ideas that would result in the company becoming "extreme," in both name and content.

"The name was still 'Eastern,' but they were starting to get crazy, doing wild things in their matches," Bob Artese said.

ECW's *NWA Bloodfest*, a two-part event held October 1 and 2, 1993, promised to be the beginning of a new era, and it was, but not because it was an NWA rebirth. The new era of ECW had less to do with the NWA than it had to do with the debuts of two men who would embody ECW for much of the rest of the company's life—Sabu and The Tazmaniac.

The two faced each other in their first ECW match, as part of *Bloodfest Part 1*, with Sabu winning. Sabu made an immediate impact, as manager Paul E. Dangerously had him brought to the ring in chains and on a gurney, looking a lot like wrestling's answer to Hannibal Lechter. Booker Paul Heyman had to talk Sabu into the unique entrance, but his daredevil tactics made him an immediate hit with the increasingly bloodthirsty audience of the increasingly violent ECW.

The next night, October 2, 1993, Sabu cemented his impactful debut by winning the ECW title from Shane Douglas.

Heyman was firmly entrenched as booker, and the debuts of The Public Enemy, Sabu, The Tazmaniac, and Axl and Ian Rotten showed that the creative direction was veering in a more darkly violent direction from the "Memphis of the Northeast" ideal Gilbert seemed to have.

ROTTEN LUCK

Brian "Axl Rotten" Knighton had started wrestling in the Mid-Atlantic area and had wrestled in and run small independent groups along the East Coast for a couple of years by the time he made his ECW debut. Initially, he had the gimmick of being an unorthodox English wrestler and even played that part on the national stage, albeit not a very popular national stage. Rotten was one of many who had been snookered into believing that a $25-

million backer was supporting the fledgling promotion on ESPN, the Global Wrestling Federation. That illusion didn't last long, because Global found itself a glorified one-town company with an ESPN television outlet and little else; by 1995 it was out of business altogether.

"That whole character came from Johnny Rotten," Axl said. "I was always a big Sex Pistols fan, but I didn't want to be Johnny. I also liked the movie *Beverly Hills Cop*, and I'd always thought Axl [the name of star Eddie Murphy's character] was a pretty cool name. But it started as a British punk thing."

The man who would become Axl Rotten said fans in ECW's home base were more demanding, even before ECW catered to that aspect of fandom.

"The fans in the Northeast—it wasn't that they were more vocal, because fans in the South were really passionate about wrestling—but the fans of the Northeast were more bloodthirsty," Rotten said. "All they care about is action and violence. You go down South, you could put a rest hold on and take a break, plan out your next series of moves. The result was matches in the Northeast tended to be a lot cruder, because they'd hammer you if you tried to slow down even for a few seconds. In a way, they were only cheating themselves out of a better match by being selfish. With fans not giving the guys in the ring a chance to collect their thoughts, they're making the guys in ring rush through their matches."

Terry Funk said the demanding fans created a set of expectations that many of the wrestlers, himself included, felt obliged to exceed.

"When I was in ECW, I felt those were some of the truly best matches, the most creative matches of my career," he said. "And it wasn't the 'smart' fan that made ECW; it was the good fan that made ECW, and God bless Tod Gordon for being the guy coming up with the first of the money to get it started, because this wrestling world would be a lot different without it."

Rotten said he had a good feel for fans in the Northeast, because he had been hearing from them on a weekly basis. Rotten cohosted a wrestling call-in show on an AM radio station in Baltimore for about eight months in the early 1990s. The show aired every Saturday from 10 a.m. to noon, and Axl Rotten said he was hearing from fans about the independent scene in the Northeast, which appeared to be heating up.

Axl Rotten had also made the acquaintance of Paul Heyman, several months earlier, when both were in WCW. Rotten was working some WCW

shots as a preliminary wrestler, and Heyman was on his way out of the company. WCW was underutilizing each, and the two men hit it off almost immediately.

Later, Axis trainee and longtime tag partner John “Ian Rotten” Williams was running independent shows in Maryland and brought in “big brother” Axl to team with him for a few shows. The two decided to bring in a manager to accompany them to ringside. Conveniently, Paul E. Dangerously, one of the top ringside managers in wrestling, had recently become available.

“We were backstage at that show and started talking to Paul, and he told us to be in Philadelphia the next night,” Axl Rotten said.

And so began the tenure of one of wrestling’s bloodier teams in a company whose changing talent base was getting increasingly edgy and violent.

TAKE THIS!

The ECW television show was edgier than other shows, too. Announcer Joey Styles regularly peppered his commentary with snarky swipes aimed at WCW and the WWF. One week, the ECW TV show began with Styles reading a newspaper bearing a large headline on the WWF steroid scandal (by this point, about nine months from going to trial).

Heyman knew that ECW was something of an underdog, a promotion that wasn’t making much profit at all, if any. He also knew that he could use that to his advantage, by positioning ECW as the underdog it was and WWF and WCW as “the enemy.”

When Medusa did not appear at the November 13, 1993 (eight days after Sabu wrestled young independent wrestler and fellow Sheik trainee Rob Van Dam in a match in Taylor, Michigan), *November to Remember* show, fans were told the WWF had signed her and told her to no-show the event.

If the two companies felt like “the enemy,” they showed no signs of it. Anyway, they had bigger problems. On November 23, 1993, Vince McMahon was indicted on federal steroid charges. And WCW had to

rearrange its main-event picture, when Sid Vicious, set to unseat Vader as WCW champion, got himself fired. It happened after a brawl with Arn Anderson in England, a brawl that ended with Vicious stabbing Anderson with scissors and hospitalizing him.

Heyman had known McMahon since the early 1980s when Heyman worked as a ringside photographer. At 15, he had braces and pimples, and when McMahon asked him what he did, Heyman told him the truth—he was in high school. McMahon, according to people there at the time, laughed and said, “That’s a hell of a story.”

As 1993 closed, ECW events were still not making money, but its tapes were becoming popular among the newsletter-reading hardcore fans, and its television presence was expanding on UHF and cable stations in the Northeast.

There were never huge throngs of fans at ECW events, but the fans who did come to the shows quickly became some of the most vociferous, zealous fans in the country. Evidence of the loyalty by ECW fans in Philadelphia was their willingness to cram themselves in the uncomfortably hot New Alhambra arena, the building that became known as ECW Arena.

“Even in the winter, it was 150 degrees in there,” fan John Bailey said. “When we got there to set chairs up in the afternoon, it was cool, but when they let those people in, the temperature shot up. I don’t ever recall a time when it was freezing in there.”

Others who went in the winter said the lack of heat in the building made it almost sub-arctic in the winter. In any event, few were comfortable.

ECW wrestlers also tended to have different attitudes than most wrestlers at that time. Even the Triple Threat and Francine—when they were the top heels in the company later on—would take time after the matches to talk to fans devoted enough to stick around when the shows had ended. Francine said taking time with fans after shows came with the territory.

“The fans were always very important to me, because without them I wouldn’t have a job,” she said. “I tried to take time for everyone. ECW fans were the greatest and most loyal fans in the world.”

THE FRANCHISE IS MADE

ECW's first major splash was February 5, 1994, on a show called *The Night the Line Was Crossed*. The show drew a sellout 1,300 fans to the ECW Arena, headlined by a *three-way*, or triangle, match for the ECW heavyweight championship. The name *three-way dance* did not come into play until months after Funk, Sabu, and Douglas tore down the house, going to a 60-minute draw, but the impact of that match on American wrestling cannot be overstated. Three-way and four-way matches would become increasingly popular for main events in WCW and the WWF as the 1990s wore on, and the Douglas-Funk-Sabu match was the bout that popularized not only the concept, but such spots as the three-way sleeper.

After the match ended, Douglas gave a fiery interview, laced with shoot comments, that left a lot of people in wrestling thinking they were watching the industry's next big star. At the very least, the interview bolstered Douglas' sneering, arrogant persona of "The Franchise," a role the formerly fresh-faced good guy seemed born to play. With the combination of his own hard work and that character, Douglas would become one of ECW's definitive characters.

"Paul's original idea for 'The Franchise' was more along the lines of someone who would be a babyface," Douglas said. "This was right around the time the NFL started designating certain players as their franchise players, so the term was fresh. Paul envisioned me wearing jerseys of popular athletes to the ring and seeing me hobnob with people like Mario Lemieux [legendary Pittsburgh Penguins hockey player and a friend of Douglas']."

Douglas went back to Heyman with a question that would completely redefine the character: "Wouldn't 'The Franchise' think those other sports' players should be wearing *his* jersey?"

Douglas said Heyman's *eyes* lit up at the possibilities of the new character. He seemed to like the idea of demonizing a star athlete.

"Here was this little Jewish kid from New York who was not the star athlete type by any means, and he saw 'The Franchise' as the captain of the football team who would fuck your girlfriend just because he could," Douglas said.

"The Franchise" took the next step the following month, capturing the ECW title from Funk in another unique match in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.

Douglas teamed with The Public Enemy and Mr. Hughes to defeat Funk, Road Warrior Hawk, Kevin Sullivan, and The Tazmaniac, in a WarGames cage match. Each participant had put up something in the match—if Sullivan or Tazmaniac lost the fall, they would have to stop teaming; Hawks losing would have meant he could no longer use the Road Warrior gimmick (which should have told fans there was no way Hawk was going to lose); Douglas would have his head shaved if he were beaten; anyone pinning either of The Public Enemy would win the tag titles; and Hughes' losing would have put his manager, Jason, in the cage for five minutes with all four opponents.

Funk put up his ECW title, and Douglas won it when he pinned Funk after "suffocating" him with a plastic bag. The match finish was a reprise of an idea Funk had in WCW to attack Rie Flair with a plastic bag, but WTBS ordered the angle shelved, because of a furor over the use of the bag. By 1994, that incident was tame compared to some of the things ECW had already shown its fans.

Douglas continued a theme in ECW to which Heyman would repeatedly return—the no-frills champion.

"The thought of me carrying the belt was that in the center of the storm with all the crazy shit that was going on, here was a serious wrestler as the champion," Douglas said.

Douglas' "The Franchise" character also made an impact with the fans by blending the fantasy of his in-ring villainy with the wrestling-industry politics that had left him legitimately frustrated. He said Heyman's giving him a free hand in developing the character was what breathed life into "The Franchise."

"Paul never tried to step in," he said. "He gave me the concept, and he let me go with it, to build the character to what I said it should be. That made it more comfortable and personal to me, and that's why I think it worked."

A favorite target of his promos was wrestling icon Rie Flair. Flair was respected by arenas full of fans for putting on stellar matches and loved by barrooms full of people for whom Flair bought drinks when he paid $1,000-a-night tabs for everyone in the room. However, Douglas saw Flair as a political manipulator who held down Douglas and others who were young and threatened his status on top. Douglas said as much in his Franchise promos and encouraged "Flair is dead!" chants from the ECW flock.

NWA AND WCW

While Douglas was coming into his own as a top heel, Jim Crockett was still trying to get his WWN off the ground. At the end of February, he held a taping with many ECW stars, plus names like Hawk, Jake Roberts, and “Cowboy” Bob Orton (father of Randy). Crockett had wanted Gordon to entwine ECW further into the NWA by making it part of Crockett’s planned WWN. Gordon declined, wanting to maintain ECW’s independence.

By this point, the bloom was also off of the rose of Heyman’s relationship with Crockett. The original plan was Heymans work in ECW would serve as a springboard for the WWN, of which ECW would ultimately become a satellite promotion. However, ECW quickly seemed to catch on among Philadelphia-area fans, particularly after Heyman transformed it from “Memphis North” into one of the most creatively groundbreaking promotions in the world. Unfortunately, Crockett did not seem to understand Sabu’s psychotic aerial style. Crockett was certainly no rap music fan, and the concept of The Public Enemy was lost on him. Crockett, in his 50s, did not seem to share Heymans desire to appeal to younger viewers through modern pop culture. Meanwhile, Heyman, half Crockett’s age, continued writing for people even younger than himself.

Heymans creative success in ECW meant he did not have to put up with Crockett’s out-of-touch wrestling views, and he apparently decided to make ECW his home in wrestling and sever ties with Crockett.

Although ECW would make a habit of portraying the two major U.S. companies as its mortal enemies, an agreement with WCW was apparent as early as 1994 when WCW wrestlers Bobby Eaton and Arn Anderson showed up on ECW’s April 16, 1994, event.

Funk also worked a blossoming angle in ECW, pitting ECW against the would-be-resurgent NWA. After an April 23, 1994, match with Chris Benoit at a show promoted by NWA promoter Dennis Coraluzzo, Funk took a microphone and declared ECW to be superior to any NWA group.

“I loved working with Chris,” Funk said, of what would be his only match against the gifted Canadian wrestler. “He was, and is, such a talented boy. As for that promo, that was just me realizing that this was an issue that

was strengthening between these two companies. You play on what is the hot issue, and that was the issue of the time in that area. No one from ECW told me to go out and say that, and Coraluzzo didn't either."

Another WCW alum, Nancy "Woman" Sullivan, made her ECW debut at *When Worlds Collide*, ECW's May 14, 1994, show. After losing a Singapore cane match to Tommy Cairo and Peaches, The Sandman and Woman destroyed Cairo and Peaches (The Sandman's real-life wife, Lori) and forged an in-ring alliance.

Nancy was not the only Sullivan working in Philadelphia that month. WCW's *Slamboree* pay-per-view drew 4,800 fans and featured her husband, Kevin Sullivan, teaming with Cactus Jack, unseating the Nasty Boys to become WCW tag champions. However, the brawling Cactus Jack was bickering with WCW management, and their conflict would soon come to a head, with Cactus' first ECW appearance playing a major role in the final blowup.

The pay-per-view was one of WCW's larger crowds in months in Philadelphia, a town the company's Crockett-owned predecessor had owned in the 1980s. Meanwhile, ECW was drawing steady crowds in the building that became christened the ECW Arena, and people outside the city were starting to take serious notice of the company's apparent ascension.

In the November 27, 1993, edition of the *Pro Wrestling Torch* newsletter, publisher Wade Keller wrote, "ECW, with a Tuesday night cable show on a regional sports channel with a low budget, draws four-figure crowds at a shack in Philadelphia, while WCW, with $100,000 openings for their program on cable's top network, draws mid-three-figure crowds at their prestigious home-base arena. Somebody's doing something right, and somebody else isn't."

Before WCW's *Slamboree* though, ECW broadcasts took a turn for the worse, because Joey Styles left as the announcer. He would only be gone for a couple of weeks before being lured back, but interim announcer Willie Watts made those few weeks seem like years.

Styles was back in time for Sabu versus Cactus Jack, at the June 24, 1994, *Hostile City Showdown* show.

Sabu had become the symbolic face of ECW, and this was something of a dream match for the ECW faithful. Mick "Cactus Jack" Foley had built a reputation as a crowd-pleasing brawler with a penchant for taking dangerous bumps.

The match started before the bell even rang, because Cactus went right after Sabu. As they brawled around the ECW Arena, Styles exclaimed, “These two will fight each other anywhere on this planet!”

Cactus dominated much of the match, but in the end, Sabu won it in front of his hometown fans.

After the match, Cactus Jack gave an emotional interview about how upset he was at losing the “dream match” against Sabu. To show how strongly he felt, Cactus spat upon the WCW tag belt he still held and threw the belt down. The gesture made the interview a memorable one, but it also brought the wrath of WCW’s higher-ups onto Foley, particularly booker Rie Flair.

“I definitely didn’t think that was the right thing to do politically,” said Kevin Sullivan, Foley’s tag partner at the time. “I knew it was political suicide. I also understood why he did it, but I knew there would be serious consequences. People seem to think wrestling is a real liberal business, but it’s always been run by ultra right-wing Republican conservatives, and they see things a certain way. Mick paid the price, but, of course, it all ended well for Cactus.”

Jim Crockett was still looking to start up his World Wrestling Network, but was no longer trying to work with ECW. His “old-school” ideas about promoting wrestling did not jibe with the envelope-pushing pair of Gordon and Heyman. ECW was still working with the NWA though, because plans were made to crown Shane Douglas the new NWA world champion. Douglas initially balked, because the first offer called for him to earn only $150 a night as champion, but he eventually agreed.

THE NEXT LEVEL

The next two months in the ECW Arena contained key moments in ECW history. In July, The Public Enemy defeated the Funk brothers, Terry and Dory, in a barbed-wire match. The win over the venerable legends gave The Public Enemy the credibility Heyman had been wanting for them since the team’s debut.

“I would never try to say that I made them overnight, but I think that match did make them to a very large extent,” Terry Funk said. “It was something Paul E. asked us to do on their behalf and on behalf of the ECW company, and it was absolutely the right thing to do. Public Enemy had the right to have it done for them, because they were truly creative and busted their asses, to get over to the degree they did.”

That match contained an often-imitated moment, in which Terry asked for someone in the crowd to throw him a chair to use. His request was answered in a shower of chairs, about 80 in all. When ECW held a rematch in Florida, fans there re-enacted the chair-throwing.

“That had just played on TV, so the fans there must have just thought, ‘So *that’s* what we’re supposed to do,’” George Tahinos said.

Less than a week after the show featuring The Public Enemy versus the Funks, a federal jury acquitted WWF owner McMahon in his steroid trial. However, with longtime meal ticket Hulk Hogan having gone to WCW after a months-long absence from the ring, the WWF’s long-inept rival finally had enough firepower to take him on.

ECW again seemed poised to make the breakthrough that would give it stability and make it a financial success, as the company was set to debut on New York’s Madison Square Garden Network in September 1994. An influx of new talent, including Too Cold Scorpio and Dean Malenko, made ECW seem somewhat resurgent, and a show was scheduled that was to cement the relationship between Eastern Championship Wrestling and the National Wrestling Alliance—the NWA title tournament in the ECW Arena with plans to coronate Douglas as the face of the alliance.

That show was even more memorable than Coraluzzo and the NWA could have hoped, although what happened was something few people saw coming and something that changed ECW forever.

CHAPTER 5

THE BIRTH OF EXTREME

“They can all kiss my ass!”

–SHANE DOUGLAS, THROWING DOWN THE NWA TITLE

“What in the hell is he doing”

–JOEY STYLES

THE NWA WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT TITLE TOURNAMENT featured some of the top talent available to independent promoters. The August 27, 1994, show kicked off with a Too Cold Scorpio-Chris Benoit match that was every bit the aerial showcase the next match was not. Matt Borne, in the Doink the Clown regalia he had worn in the WWF, lasted less than a minute against ECW’s idea of a comedy figure, the monstrous 911. Al “911” Polling’s gimmick was to come in the ring and choke-slam heels. On this night, he delivered four choke-slams to Borne and pinned him quickly, a transparent message to fans that ECW would not tolerate the goofiest of gimmicks.

ECW champion Shane Douglas toppled Too Cold Scorpio in the finals and was handed the world title. He took the belt with a smile, but then said into the microphone, “Wait a second.”

He threw out the names of NWA legends and then looked up and said, “This is it tonight, Dad,” in reference to his father who had recently passed away.

Douglas later said that was the moment he committed fully to the double-cross that would take ECW to the next level.

Douglas threw down the NWA belt, saying he refused to take the torch of “an organization that died *seven* years ago.”

Instead, he said, he would light a new torch—the torch of ECW. He walked to the ring apron, picked up the ECW belt, and held it up as he declared himself “the new *Extreme* Championship Wrestling champion of the world.”

As NWA figurehead Dennis Coraluzzo sat, apparently dumbfounded at ringside, the promo ended, and the audience erupted in a nearly unanimous chant of “ECW! ECW!”

After the show, Coraluzzo cut what sounded an awful lot like a wrestling promo, talking about how Douglas was indeed the NWA champion.

So was this all a planned storyline? Apparently not as far as Coraluzzo was concerned, but to Heyman and Gordon, it was. That much became clear the following week on television when Gordon announced that NWA Eastern Championship Wrestling had folded and was being replaced by *Extreme* Championship Wrestling, which he claimed would be beholden to no one.

In 1994, the word *extreme* was on the cusp of becoming the buzzword for sports and pop culture that were more outrageous than they were normal. Within a year of the advent of Extreme Championship Wrestling, there was extreme everything—games, sports, soda pop—under the pop-culture umbrella.

However, as late as the afternoon of the NWA tournament—Heyman would later tell people he was close to in the company—he was thinking of changing the name even further. He toyed with the name Extreme Combat Worldwide, to distance the company even more from the wrestling of bygone eras. Ultimately he apparently could not justify removing the word *wrestling*.

The *swerve*—a storyline change without the knowledge of one of the parties involved—served the dual purpose of smacking Coraluzzo and moving ECW forward as perhaps no other single move could. In the months leading up to the tournament, Coraluzzo had become a true thorn in Gordons side, not by promoting competitive shows in opposition, but by calling the fire department every month and claiming the building was too crowded to be safe.

Heyman finally called Coraluzzo, an old acquaintance, and told him that ECW was also Heyman’s company, and that if Coraluzzo screwed with it again, Heyman would be more than happy to screw back.

At the very next ECW show in Philadelphia, Coraluzzo’s son Mark was listed as the complainant when the fire department came back again. Gordon and Heyman decided to put the screws to Coraluzzo in a way that would propel their company and make Coraluzzo’s seem obsolete in one fell swoop.

Some still believe that Coraluzzo knew the in-ring “double-cross” was coming. That school of thought maintains that the true double-cross came

when Gordon and Heyman never delivered on the NWA-ECW feud Coraluzzo had been promised would result from the tournament finish.

At the very least, Coraluzzo was wary of something like the eventual outcome happening, because he spent the week before the tournament show vacillating on whether he should go. People close to Coraluzzo were warning him that something was up, and at least one friend told him exactly what would occur. At one point, Coraluzzo even considered pulling the tournament altogether over his fears of a double-cross.

Clearly, Douglas knew, as did Heyman and Gordon. Rumors of the swerve were circulating, but very few people knew exactly how it would all go down.

One person who knew something was going to happen was ECW ring announcer Bob Artese, who introduced that night's performers.

"Shane told me he was going to throw the belt down in the ring, and he said to make sure I grabbed the belt, so it wouldn't get destroyed or stolen while all the mayhem was going on," Artese said.

By contrast, one group that was clearly fooled was the collection of "smart fans" sitting at ringside. As Douglas gave his "the NWA is dead" litany, many of the fans who prided themselves on being the most knowledgeable in the country sat slack-jawed and shocked.

"Its really kind of neat when you can do something to fool the people who know what's really going on," Artese said.

In a 1998 America Online chat, Heyman discussed his motivations for using and throwing away the NWA name to establish ECW.

"We broke away from the NWA because the National Wrestling Alliance was old school when old school wasn't hip anymore," he wrote. "We wanted to set our mark, we wanted to break away from the pack, we wanted to let the world know that we weren't just some independent promotion. And we knew that the NWA in its form in 1994 was a relic, was an artifact, and trying to promote that name in 1994 was doing an injustice to the history of a once-great organization. The company appeared to be on the verge of getting bigger. Almost from the start, fans had come from out of town to see shows put on by this local Philadelphia promotion, and increasingly in recent months, ECW had started making inroads, promoting other nearby cities."

A NEW NAME WITH THE SAME GAME

The morning following the tournament, television viewers found that Eastern Championship Wrestling really was gone and had been replaced by Extreme Championship Wrestling.

“It was really just a name change,” George Tahinos said. “They didn’t have to change much about the way they were doing things.”

And the Philadelphia home crowd was increasingly loyal, with some fans even becoming characters themselves after a fashion. “Hat Guy” John Bailey said he got different reactions from wrestlers in the arena.

“Public Enemy were really the first ones to start messing with me,” he said. “They’d walk by and hit me with my own hat, after swiping it off my head. Now, Johnny Hotbody, he’d spit right at me. I never knew why, but unless he just played his part well, he looked like he really wanted to get at me.”

Bob Barnett made another cross-country trip to Philadelphia to catch the November 11, 1994, ECW Arena show. Although the number of fans would not compare to a Madison Square Garden crowd, Barnett said the fanatics in the audience made the show hot.

“Axl Rotten, I thought, was really good, and Shane Douglas was at the top of his game,” Barnett said. “He could get incredible heat, and he was at the height of his powers. He should have been a really big star. It was one good match after another, but the atmosphere was so electric. It’s not what it was, but what was created in that arena. When it’s that crowded and there’s that much heat, you can’t sit back and say, ‘This sucks.’ You get sucked into it, and that’s when I think wrestling is great—when the show is truly an event.”

As the company spread out, Heyman was working on his next project. Having gotten The Public Enemy to the point he wanted them, Heyman turned his attentions to Tommy Dreamer. Dreamer was Tom Laughlin, a pretty-boy babyface who had toiled in the independents for a few years, but ECW fans crapped all over him. However, Heyman extracted the thing about Tommy Dreamer that would get him over to the fans—his ability to convey a never-say-die attitude, regardless of what he was facing.

The first sign that Dreamer could get over occurred after a September 1994 match with The Sandman, where the loser would receive 10 whacks with the Singapore cane. The cane was actually a batch of several thin sticks bound together. Similar weapons had been known in wrestling as *kendo sticks*, but when an American youth named Michael Fay made national headlines in 1994 by being sentenced to a caning for committing vandalism in Singapore, Heyman incorporated current events into wrestling lingo, and the Singapore cane was born.

Within a few years, the cane would become an object of contention, as a couple of wrestlers received concussions from whacks with it, but it became a key part of The Sandman's gimmick.

The Sandman beat Dreamer in the match, but Dreamer seemed to earn some fans' respect when he refused Woman's offers to cut short the post-match beating in exchange for Dreamer declaring his subservience to Woman and The Sandman. The caning was brutal, but Dreamer kept coming back for more, and the fans showed Dreamer a modicum of respect for the first time.

Their feud continued, and on October 1, 1994, ECW tried to blur the line between real life and wrestling fantasy with an injury angle. Dreamer and The Sandman were in an "I quit" match, playing off of Dreamer's refusal to submit to the caning. They were also playing off the fans' grudging acceptance of Dreamer, something Dreamer acknowledged in his prematch interview. He said, "It took me a year of my life to get to where hardcore fans respected me," and he said he would not squander that respect by giving up.

Dreamer opened up by attacking The Sandman with items handed from the crowd—including a car door. As the match progressed, The Sandman got the upper hand. When the cigarette-smoking Sandman stood triumphant over Dreamer, Dreamer gave one last shot, and The Sandman's cigarette appeared to go into his eye.

Woman started shrieking and cursing at Dreamer, as he stood over the stretcher bearing The Sandman, and even Tod Gordon appeared worried over what had happened to the hated villain. Gordon even screamed for the TV cameras to get away from the scene of what was being sold as a very real injury.

Of course, it was just an angle, and it paid off when a "blind" Sandman came out to "retire," only to cane an apologetic Dreamer into oblivion.

Such were the lengths Heyman went to in an effort to surprise an audience that prided itself on being the most knowledgeable of any group of fans.

Bailey said the air of unpredictability was one of the main things that kept fans coming back to the ECW Arena month after month.

“When you’d go to a WWE, or WWF, as it was known back then, taping, it was like watching something that was so staged. Nothing seemed to be on impulse, and everything was so predictable,” he said.

Booker Heyman did not even exempt himself from doing what was necessary to keep the fans guessing. Heyman played on some fans’ knowledge of his reluctance to endure painful bumps—during a match pitting Joe and Dean Malenko against The Public Enemy, Heyman inserted himself into the match and took a Rocco Rock moonsault through a table.

Throughout its short life, ECW got the rap of being the place where guys beat each other with chairs, broke tables, and had garbage-wrestling brawls. Well, it was that, but it was also a company that showcased some of the best pure wrestling matches you were likely to see in the States, with men like Chris Benoit and Dean Malenko on the roster.

And Gordon, Heyman, and Styles were not shy about reminding viewers of that. During one fast-paced exchange of moves between the Tazmaniac and Malenko, Styles declared, “I haven’t seen that much action on a pay-per-view in the past two years, and we did it in 90 seconds!”

ECW also kept the “us versus them” mentality alive wherever possible. When Chad Austin left for Smoky Mountain Wrestling near the end of 1994, his last match featured him getting on the house microphone to announce he was leaving, because “ECW was small-time.” Shane Douglas (joined by seemingly half the ECW locker room) promptly beat him up and made him say, “ECW is No. 1!”

TALENT SHIFT

On November 6, 1994, WCW co-promoted a pay-per-view that created a legal issue when the AAA/IWC show was titled *When Worlds Collide*. ECW had claimed rights to *When Worlds Collide* as the title of a wrestling show and threatened to sue. The issue was eventually settled, with WCW

agreeing to send three of its performers—Steve Austin, Kevin Sullivan, and manager Sherri Martel—to ECW's November 18, 1994, show.

Brian Pillman ended up substituting for Austin, and he and Douglas faced WCW alums Too Cold Scorpio and Ron Simmons.

"[WCW] had done infringement on an ECW trademark, *When Worlds Collide*, so they owed us, and their backs were against the wall," Douglas said. "I was in the office with Tod and Paul when they made the call, and the WCW guys said, 'Take anybody you want.' Paul said, 'We'll take Austin,' and initially, they said yes to that, but then they called back and said Steve was injured or had a prior engagement, but whatever it was, they were getting out of it. This was about when Austin was getting pretty hot, and WCW said we could have Pillman instead. At first, I thought Paul was going to say, 'Fuck off,' but Paul was prescient enough to see that Brian would fit in even better. All you had to do was put a microphone in front of him and let Brian be Brian."

That was something ECW fans would experience more deeply a little more than a year later.

Sherri, Douglas' former manager, turned on him during the tag match. In response, Douglas pile-drove her after the match. Douglas would later give an in-ring promo, accusing her of being an agent of Rie Flair, the WCW icon whom The Franchise detested.

Sullivan re-formed his team with Cactus Jack, but turned on him in a match with The Public Enemy, although Cactus' regular partner, Mikey Whipwreck, tried to save his hardcore mentor.

Cactus gave a brilliant interview after the match, talking about all of Sullivan's villainous antics in WCW since Cactus Jack had left. Their WCW team had split, and it was Sullivan who beat Cactus in a loser-leaves-WCW match, Cactus' last for the company. Cactus said that if only Sullivan had told him Sullivan would turn on Hulk Hogan and his own "brother," Cactus would have helped. The interview ended with Woman confronting Cactus about talking about her husband. That confrontation ended with The Sandman, Woman's charge, attacking Cactus Jack. The feud with The Sandman would be Cactus Jack's first main campaign as an ECW regular and led to the return of Terry Funk, who surprised fans by becoming heel after allying himself with The Sandman. Their pairing led to the popular Cactus joining forces with the hated Franchise. Styles, on television, openly

admitted that Douglas and Cactus were longtime friends, having trained together under Dominic DeNucci.

Whipwreck was another Heyman project, starting as a job guy whose name was derived from Maryland promoter Dennis Whipwreck, whom Heyman wanted to mock (a la another regular loser of matches, dubbed "Joel Hartgood"). However, Whipwreck started getting over as the undersized underdog who never gave up. In the ultimate irony, Whipwreck ended up as ECW world champion, and by the time he had reached that level, his namesake was out of the wrestling business altogether.

TAKING FLIGHT

But for all the additions and surprises in 1995, ECW suffered a major loss for months, due in no small part to Heyman's own stubbornness.

In October 1994, Sabu had agreed to stay in ECW although he had been tempted by an offer to go to the WWF. He was set to face Chris Benoit in the main event of the upcoming *November to Remember* show. That match ended in catastrophe when Sabu took a bad bump and landed on top of his head in the ring. The impact bruised Sabu's spine and caused him nerve damage.

A year after Shane Douglas, Terry Funk, and Sabu put the triangle match on the map, Heyman upped the ante, pitting three tag teams against each other. Although the original match is remembered as *The Three-Way Dance*, that term actually did not debut until ECW was promoting this April 8, 1995, ECW Arena card. Ironically, the only man in the three-team match who was involved in the original three-way found himself replaced on the card and out of the company.

Sabu had a conflict, as *The Three-Way Dance* show coincided with a date he had with New Japan Pro Wrestling.

Sabu later claimed both Gordon and Heyman understood he wouldn't be in Philadelphia on April 8. Heyman, however, would claim Sabu "gave his word" to be at the ECW show, only to break that word. One aspect of preshow promotion appears to bear out Sabu's version—days before the event Gordon put out word that Sabu would not be there.

However, ringside photographer George Tahinos said that Sabu had planned on working the ECW Arena show.

“He really thought that with the time difference he could make it to both shows,” Tahinos said.

Heyman opened the show with a speech to the ECW faithful in attendance that night, a speech that came across as part wrestling promo and part fire-and-brimstone sermon. Judging from the “Fuck Sabu!” chants that filled the arena midway through his speech, it seems Heyman was preaching to the already converted for the most part.

“Sabu gave us a commitment and then decided that because he was offered more money on a weekly basis, he will not give you what you paid to see and decided not to give me the courtesy of a phone call,” Heyman began. “You people, the audience of ECW, and all the stars within have been fucked and were deemed not important enough to see performed a match that you have been waiting since Christmas for. You voted with your dollars to see him, and Sabu decided to go to Japan.”

The fact that Sabu had turned down a potentially lucrative tour for New Japan a few weeks earlier in order to fill ECW commitments somehow escaped mention. Heyman did little to stem the anger of fans toward the man whose scarred body was a testament to his commitment to them.

After the “Fuck Sabu!” chant gained steam, Heyman said, “I got news for you—you’re right! Fuck him! The only way he is gonna walk his miserable ass back in that door anymore is if you people say, ‘We forgive him.’ I’ll bring him back, if you say so.”

In many ways, Heyman the booker held true to old-school ideals. Most major ECW matches had winners and losers. ECW got over submission holds. Heyman always believed in adhering to stipulations. If there was a no-show at an ECW event, the company would announce it to the fans, explain why, and offer a substitution that would ultimately teach regular fans that the only thing better than the advertised card would be if someone on the card didn’t show up.

Heyman always seemed to care that ECW fans felt they had gotten their money’s worth from the live shows. This night was no exception. Faced with the loss of ECW’s top star, Heyman asked the fans to wait until intermission before deciding whether to seek a refund. For whatever his detractors say about Heyman’s honesty, Heyman was better than most wrestling promoters when it came to not lying to the fans.

“Paul E. always gave the fans a clean finish, and he always lived up to match hype,” said Scott Levy, who became a huge star in ECW as Raven. “Paul E. would lie to the boys left and right, but he’d never lie to the fans. And I’m not saying he was trying to fuck us over, but he had no problem lying to the wrestlers if he felt like he needed to.”

Right before intermission, Benoit came to the ring and called Sabu a pussy. He then called out Sabu’s partner, The Tazmaniac. Benoit and Dean Malenko went after The Tazmaniac until the unannounced Rick Steiner made the save, letting the fans know that Sabus replacement was a top talent. With brother Scott, Rick Steiner had been half of one of the top tag teams in the world. The Steiners had been on top in Japan, in WCW, and in the WWE Few fans went for the refunds, although many were mad because of how hard Sabu had worked for the company.

For the record, The Public Enemy won *The Three-Way Dance* tag main event, with The Tazmaniac taking the first pin, eliminating him and Steiner. For the final, Rocco Rock pinned Benoit, and The Public Enemy took the tag titles from Benoit and Malenko.

Malenko was also drawing attention from ECW fans for a series of matches against TV champion Eddy Guerrero. The run of matches was further proof that there was more to ECW than tables, blood, and insane stunts. The feud was a fondly remembered one, even years later, but Guerrero had not originally intended to come in as a single, or as a babyface.

In late 1994, Eddy Guerrero and Art Barr were arguably the hottest tag team in the wrestling world. The pair, known as Los Gringos Locos, were regularly causing riots in Mexico, feuding with (among others) El Hijo del Santo, one of the country’s most popular wrestlers (and son of El Santo, the most beloved pro wrestler in history).

The two had made a spectacular showing at the November 1994 *When Worlds Collide* pay-per-view that exposed Mexican *lucha libre* to many fans in the United States.

Heyman was negotiating to bring them into ECW, which could have been a huge comeback for Barr, who was basically ousted from American wrestling after a sexual assault conviction in his native Oregon. Barr had wrestled as Beetlejuice and The Juicer, essentially the same character from the movie, which helped him connect with kids. The conviction doomed his

ability to play that role, but he brilliantly reinvented himself as the cocky, obnoxious American Love Machine in Mexico.

After his and Guerrero's showing at *When Worlds Collide*, Barr was poised to make a splash in ECW as the heel he seemed born to play.

"I told [Paul E.], 'However you use them, I promise you they'll get over like crazy,'" said Charles "Konnan" Ashenoff, who was Mexico's biggest star and a booker for AAA, a young upstart that had quickly become one of the country's top promotions.

Barr and Guerrero had been looking for work outside of Mexico.

"They were both tired of working there, and the peso had devalued so badly that they went from making the equivalent of $3,000 to $5,000 a week to $2,000 or less," Konnan said.

Instead, the match that could have revitalized his career turned out to be his last. On November 23, 1994, Barr died in his sleep from a drug-related heart attack. He was 27.

As a nightly tribute to Barr that Guerrero still performed more than a decade after his partner's death, Guerrero made Barr's frog-splash finisher his own when he became a singles performer in ECW.

CHAPTER 6

QUOTH THE RAVAN

“The pain and suffering of a childhood lost. An empty swing, an empty promise a broken dreams a broken home. It’s strange how laughter looks like crying ... with no sound and raindrops taste like tears ... without the pain. Tommy Dremer, you will relive the turmoil and anguish of an uncertain youth”

—RAVEN ON ECW TELEVISION JANUARY 1995

BY 1995, ECW was drawing the same core of fans to each show in Philadelphia. It was a small, but devoted crowd who did not react to wrestlers and matches as traditional fans did. They had their favorites to be sure, but they generally expressed appreciation for effort and spectacular matches and derided what they saw as shoddy work. Even Shane Douglas, who had created as solidly villainous a heel persona as you were going to find in wrestling, got his share of cheers from fans who appreciated his efforts.

As ECW’s creative decision-maker, Heyman concluded that the days of babyfaces and heels were over, at least in his company.

That attitude was about to change, thanks to a wrestler who figured out how to get over as a heel, even to fans who grudgingly respected him.

The first ECW Arena show of 1995 was a noteworthy one for a few reasons. In the third match, the Bad Breed team of Axl and Ian Rotten lost a match to The Pitbulls (Gary Wolfe and Anthony Durante, a pair of powerhouses who were one of ECW’s top acts for the first half of the company’s life) in which the losers would have to break up forever, and the

breakup spawned one of ECW's most violent feuds between the two "brothers."

That last match ended a feud that had spanned many violent months.

Axl Rotten said The Pitbulls-Bad Breed feud was a career highlight for him.

"Oh, man, I had a great time with those guys," Rotten said. "I never had a bit of trouble with them. They were both very talented guys, good listeners."

Rotten said the incredible power Wolfe and Durante had made them perfect opponents for the Rottens.

"Well, Ian and I are both pretty hefty, so we had to trust them with our bodies, and they were so strong; they could handle us perfectly," he said.

Most wrestlers were (and are) hesitant to change something that appears to be working, but Rotten said breaking up the popular Bad Breed was his own idea. A decade later, he is not sure it was a wise choice.

"I felt like it had run its course and that being a tag-team wrestler was holding me down," Rotten said. "In retrospect, that probably wasn't true, but in hindsight, everyone's a genius."

The two had been teaming together for two years, and Ian Rotten wanted to keep the team together, but once Heyman had decided to proceed with the feud, Ian went along with the plan.

"Ian felt like I was his trainer and his mentor, and I was abandoning him," Rotten said. "But it was either do it or he was fired, so it wasn't like he had much room for negotiation."

The main event was a title match with champion Shane Douglas defending against Tully Blanchard. Once again blending reality with perceived reality, the story behind the match was that Blanchard, Rie Flair's former Four Horsemen partner, was coming to avenge Douglas' constant insults of Flair. However, Heyman curiously played Blanchard as the babyface in the match. Both Blanchard's natural abilities and the crowd's leanings made sure that decision would keep the match from working.

The show's biggest impact came in the form of Stevie Richards' new manager, Raven.

ONE BAD BOY

Raven was Scott Levy, a young wrestler who made a name for himself early as one of the best talkers in wrestling. Levy debuted as the obnoxious Scotty "The Body" Levy in Don Owen's Portland, Oregon, territory in 1989. In 1992, he debuted for WCW, as Scotty Flamingo. A year later, he was in the WWF, but not as a wrestler. As ringside manager Johnny Polo, Levy became one of the company's de facto top heels. Soon enough he was hosting WWF television programs and working increasingly behind the scenes as an associate producer of *Monday Night Raw* and the head creative person for the WWF's B-level television shows.

"Those second-run shows took, like, no real work at all to put together," he said. "It took me about 16 hours a week to do this 60-, 70-hour-a-week job. I used to get up, call the studio, and tell them I was at the office, call the office and tell them I was in the studio, and then go back to bed."

By 1995, he'd had enough. Levy had been expecting the WWF to see his heelish ability as a manager and make him a full-time in-ring performer as the company had done with Roddy Piper a decade earlier.

"I was about 225, 230 pounds, and they thought I was too small," Levy said. "Their whole attitude was, a wrestler had to be 270 pounds. The fact that I was still not allowed to be a wrestler infuriated me, and when I got to host *All-American Wrestling*, they told me I also had to stop managing. Once they took me off the air, it was only a matter of time before I quit."

Levy came up with a character—with some feedback from his friend Page Falkenberg, who wrestled in WCW as "Diamond" Dallas Page—that was almost the polar opposite of the Johnny Polo persona.

"When I left the WWF, I had to figure out what to do," Levy said. "I enjoyed being a chickenshit heel, but I came up with the Raven character, because things had gotten to that point in the business that there weren't any. Page told me, 'You can't use the chickenshit heel character anymore.'"

Levy remembered being impressed with Patrick Swayze's performance as a manipulative Zen master of crime in the movie *Point Break*, and the Raven character was born in his head, developing at a rapid clip.

"I saw it as a vicious alternative thing. I was pointed in the right direction, and it came to me," Levy said. "The name, the 'Quoth the Raven, nevermore!' catchphrase, just this maelstrom of creativity—all of the sudden, I had it."

So, now, Levy had a character—one of the most original wrestling characters in years. All he needed was a place to debut it. Levy knew wounds were too fresh from his acrimonious 1992 departure from WCW for him to try to get on there, even though Eric Bischoff had replaced Bill Watts as the company's executive vice president. Levy also knew Raven would not be able to fly in the WWF, because the company would not get behind a new character the company had nothing to do with developing or creating.

"I knew if I wanted to debut a new gimmick there, they either wouldn't use it or they'd say, 'OK,' and then just job me out," Levy said. "If you get pigeonholed in a certain role, you have to leave and come back later as the new character."

Bereft of many options, Levy said he got in touch with Jim Cornette about starting in Smoky Mountain.

"First he tells me hell bring me in—in September," Levy said. "Then it was September, and he said he'd bring me in—in October. Finally I realized he was never really going to bring me in."

Levy said the darkness in the Raven persona came from within him as his professional woes had him at a low ebb.

"I had only been in the business for six years," he said, "and I already had a pretty interesting resumé. I mean I was pretty much the last guy to go through the old territories, but at that time in 1995, I felt like a complete failure."

Raven moved from Stamford, Connecticut, where the WWF company officials lived, to Philadelphia.

"I ended up moving to Philadelphia, because it was the central hub of the indies," Raven said.

But he was in almost a catch-22 situation. He could not turn the Raven character loose on either WCW or the WWF (nor apparently in Smoky Mountain). However, he also knew the character would never get over to fans live when they had never seen it and would not understand its dark background.

"I knew I needed to be on a TV show to develop this character, because there was no real way to get something over to wrestling fans on the Internet back then," he said.

One day, Raven turned on his television set and saw something not like anything he had *seen* before.

“ECW, I had always heard, was just garbage wrestling, nothing but chairs, tables, and blood,” he said. “I guess that’s what I get for judging a book by its cover. I finally watched the show, and I thought it was the best show I had ever seen because of the storylines. The only wrestling I think came close was [Bill] Watts’ UWF [a fondly remembered 1980s promotion], which was the best stuff I ever watched.”

But when Levy made contact with ECW, Heyman was not interested, because he thought the Raven character would be little more than a dressed-down version of Johnny Polo. Again, Levy’s friend Page helped him over a hump.

“Turned out, Paul owed Page a favor; I never knew what it was for, but he did,” Levy said. “He called it in, and that was how Paul brought me in. I remember getting the call. It was a Sunday afternoon, and I was shaken awake by my roommate, telling me I *had* to get up and take this call. I had been up until about 9 a.m., doing coke, and I had taken a bunch of halcyons to help me get to sleep.”

A groggy Scott Levy picked up the phone. Page was on the other end, telling him he needed to call Heyman immediately.

Raven dialed the number Page gave him and reached Heyman, whose first words were what everyone in and around ECW had heard more than once.

“When I called Paul, he said, ‘Give me five minutes! I’ll call you right back!’”

Where Ravens story diverges from many Paul E. phone stories is that Heyman did call him right back, and the two reached an agreement for Raven to come into ECW for a two-month feud with a young babyface even Heyman was having a tough time getting over—Tommy Dreamer.

Levy said that even when Heyman relented and decided to give Raven a chance, ECW’s “evil genius” only saw him as a short-term character.

“He thought he was getting Scotty the Body only with a goth twist,” Raven said. “He didn’t know I was going to go out there and bare my soul. I had always been the life of party, but that was just a shell for a lot of inner turmoil.”

But Levy had a more immediate problem after talking to Heyman.

“I was so fucked up that five minutes after I hung up with Paul, I had no idea when I would be starting,” Levy said. “I couldn’t call back and say, ‘Hey, Paul E., I’m sorry, but I have no idea what we just talked about.’ So I

just started showing up at ECW shows, acting like I was just there checking things out. I came to a show, and Paul said, 'What are you doing here? You don't start until *next* weekend!' I just said, 'Oh, I know!'"

Tommy Dreamer confronted Raven at the February 4, 1995, *Return of the Funker* show and went after him until Raven exploded in a flurry of punches. Joey Styles, conducting the interview that broke down into the aforementioned brawl, foreshadowed the simmering feud, saying, "You two know each other from somewhere."

Over the few weeks that followed his ECW introduction, Raven explained his origins and purpose, and one of ECW's most memorable feuds was underway.

The story, as it would play out, was that Raven and Dreamer knew each other as children, and Raven was a bitter loner coming back for revenge upon the popular kid who grew up to become Tommy Dreamer.

Raven said his on-camera abusive treatment of Richards was a warped reflection of the behind-the-scenes interaction between Scott Levy and Michael "Stevie Richards" Manna.

"Me and Stevie had a real love-hate relationship, because I was a real bastard and he was out of his mind," Levy said. "He was one of my best friends, and there was no substitute for life experience. Raven was a reflection of the turmoil in my real life, and in my own life, I didn't want anyone looking up to me, so Ravens relationship with Stevie played off of that."

FLORIDA—ECW STYLE

But the insanity was still there, and not just in Philadelphia. ECW drew decent crowds in Florida right off the bat, and at a May 5, 1995, show in Fort Lauderdale (which drew 1,200, as many fans as the better ECW Arena shows were drawing), security rebuffed fans who had hoped to partake in what had become an ECW tradition. Fans in Philadelphia routinely brought weapons to hand to their favorites when the wrestlers fought by them. Security guards weren't having that in their building, however, and they ended up filling two wooden crates with frying pans,

cookie sheets, and other objects that had been intended for various wrestlers' heads. During the show, Raven and Dreamer brawled all over the building in one of their typically bloody and brutal encounters. After the match, apparently unhappy about having to keep up with the wandering brawlers, security let Heyman know that they would close down the show if anyone else brawled past the guardrail around the ring.

The next night in Tampa drew 735 fans, but those fans were not very accepting of anything that did not fit their ECW vision of blood, guts, and insanity—the crowd offered hostile boos whenever any of the wrestlers went to work on the mat to—gasp—*wrestle!*

When ECW moved into Florida, some of the wrestlers were not sure the ECW style would get over there although others did not see much difference between the intensely bloody Dusty Rhodes matches of 20 years earlier. Some of the guys also played off regional rivalries.

In an ECW Arena promo in 1995, Axl Rotten talked about a recent trip to the Sunshine State. His assessment was that Floridians saw ECW as "just a little too violent for television" and could not handle barbed-wire bats and other forms of extreme violence that separated ECW from other promotions. Rotten, a solid babyface in Philadelphia, called Florida fans "a bunch of faggots" whom he invited to "suck my ass."

So why all the bitterness? Rotten said part of it was creating a sense of Philadelphia as an ECW hometown, but part of it was also a shoot in the sense that wherever ECW went, the Philadelphia attitude went with it.

"It was just a natural thing, always," Rotten said, "whether it was Philly and New York, or anytime we went somewhere else. Philly fans were the standard by which we judged all others, and if you re not as vocal, you're not a real ECW fan."

Back in Philadelphia, the divisiveness over Sabu's departure continued. While some fans still supported the hard-working high-flier, others were ready to dump on him. When The Public Enemy member Rocco Rock hit a moonsault onto Pitbull 2, putting both men through a table, a "Fuck Sabu!" chant broke out at the May 13, 1995, show.

RAVEN AND HIS ENTOURAGE

The next piece would complete the puzzle of Ravens group and add a new dimension to the Raven-Dreamer feud.

When Dreamer finally got his one-on-one chance against Raven, without having to go through qualifying opponents first, things were going his way. He seemed to be on the verge of winning the match and shutting Raven up for good when Raven appeared to go after a woman in the crowd. When Dreamer went to save her, she apparently sprayed him with mace, making him easy prey for a Raven pin.

What Raven would later explain was that this gorgeous woman was Beulah McGillicutty, a girl both Raven and Dreamer had known when they were kids. Beulah supposedly had been a fat girl with an unrequited crush on Dreamer, who now aligned herself with Raven, who would get revenge for both of them.

Beulah was Theresa Hays, and she actually had wrestling experience, working briefly in the 1980s as Brian Pillman's sister for an angle in the Hart family's Stampede promotion. Raven met her in Florida shortly after his ECW debut.

"I was in South Beach, and I ran into [pro baseball player] Ron Gant, who had Theresa with him. Ron introduced us, and Theresa said she wanted to get back into the business. She had done a spread in *Penthouse* and sent me some of her nude pics, and I said, 'Sweet! I went to Paul E. and said, Took at these! We've gotta get her into the company."'

Heyman agreed, but his idea was to put her with Raven, who was not crazy about the idea.

"I always felt like Raven didn't need a valet," he said. "It didn't fit with my vision of the character as a dark loner. There's a whole psychology to valets, and a lot of guys today don't know how to get the girl over without taking away from themselves."

Finally, however, Raven came up with a role for Hays that would make her an integral character in the Raven-Dreamer dynamic.

The Raven-Dreamer feud grew and mutated over time, to include The Pitbulls, Brian Lee, Brian "The Blue Meanie" Heffron, and Francine Fournier, among others.

One of the Dreamer-Raven spin-offs involved the powerful Pitbulls, when the roughnecks got tired of mistreatment at the hands of Raven and ditched manager Stevie Richards in favor of Francine.

Francine Fournier had started in ECW as Richards' storyline girlfriend, until she found herself in a feud with Beulah. When Richards found himself the special referee in the match between the two women, he gleefully abandoned his own woman in favor of boss Ravens.

Francine had proven her toughness in training.

"I attended the ECW wrestling school in Philadelphia," she wrote in an email interview. "J.T. Smith was my trainer. I was the only woman, and I trained with four other guys. After about seven months there, I was booked on my first house show. And they just kept using me after that."

In interviews conducted since ECW's demise, Dreamer has positioned himself as the essence of the show. However, in Heyman's mind, he never seemed to be the top star. Dreamer almost always seemed like ECW's No. 2 hero at any given time. He was to ECW as "Chief" Jay Strongbow was to the World Wide Wrestling Federation of the 1970s—the guy whom the villains would beat to set them up for top feuds. Throughout the Raven feud, there was never the sense from fans that Dreamer was as over as Raven, and Heyman was certainly not conveying that Dreamer was the superior wrestler, as evidenced by Raven's repeated victories. Still, by giving Dreamer a quest for an elusive win over Raven that meant as much to him as any championship, the feud gave fans a way to identify with the former pretty boy in green suspenders, and his credibility with ECW fans only grew.

And as dark and serious as Raven's character and feud with Dreamer were, behind the scenes Raven and Richards cooked up skits for Richards and the Meanie that were some of the funniest bits in ECW's short history. Richards and Meanie carried out parodies of some of wrestling's biggest acts, past and present. Even hardened ECW fans couldn't keep from laughing at the spectacle of Richards and the corpulent Meanie strutting across the ring like The Fabulous Ones, one of the top teams of the 1980s.

Raven's world even grew to include one of the 1980s superstars whose wild style and intensity in the ring had inspired more than one of ECW's flock—Terry "Bamm Bamm" Gordy.

Gordy had been the bedrock of The Fabulous Freebirds, one of the most influential tag teams in wrestling's history. The Freebirds popularized the use of rock music accompanying wrestlers to the ring and were responsible for some of the biggest feuds of the previous decade. Gordy himself was recognized as one of the best 300-pounders in wrestling and

made a fair amount of history on his own. While Gordy did not invent the move, he was instrumental in popularizing the power bomb as a finishing maneuver. In the early 1990s, Gordy practically reinvented himself as one half of another hugely successful tag team—The Miracle Violence Connection, one of the top teams in Japan, with his partner, Steve "Dr. Death" Williams.

However, the Freebirds' hard-partying reputation was no mere gimmick, and by 1996, two drug overdoses had left Gordy a shell of his former self. But when he came in to challenge Raven at *Hardcore Heaven 1996*, he almost looked like Bamm Bamm once again, as if he had finally reignited whatever spark kept him going in the 1980s. Raven won that match and then introduced the latest (and, by far, the youngest) member of his entourage.

While Dreamer spent much of summer 1996 battling Brian Lee, Raven was embroiled in an ECW title feud against The Sandman, who had gone from being a heel to one of the most popular performers in the company. His "Enter Sandman" entrance had become a sing-along anthem for fans at the ECW Arena, and fans were happy to have The Sandman pour one of his beers down their throats as he smoked and made his way to ringside, often taking as long to reach the ring as the song took to end. Many an ECW babyface took a beating because the guy rescuing them was The Sandman, doing his full entrance nearly every time out.

One constant about The Sandman was his beer. This was not a man who was living his gimmick—this was a man who liked to drink beer. More than one person who worked for ECW said he would often have a beer in the locker room before a show. Often, the rule was that The Sandman would bring much beer and give cans away to any other wrestler who asked, but he was taking what was left with him.

The Sandman-Raven feud grew to include the youngest heel in wrestling history. Raven had hooked up with The Sandman's ex-wife, Lori, a.k.a. "Peaches." When Raven unveiled her at the June 22 *Hardcore Heaven* show, The Sandman just laughed at the attempt to get under his skin. But he wasn't laughing when Raven brought out Tyler Fullington, The Sandman's eight-year-old son. Tyler called his father "a drunk" and said, "Now, I worship Raven."

The emotional impact of the feud was unique, and over the next few weeks, even the hardened ECW fans were rooting for the emotional reunion

of father and son, as Raven and The Sandman battered each other all over the arena.

Fan John Bailey said brawls throughout the buildings over the years were just a way to make every fans seat a front-row seat if only for a few seconds.

“When you watched an ECW show, they showed the fans up close, more than WCW or the WWF ever did,” Bailey said. “The ECW guys made fans a part of show, and you were reminded of that every time they went into the crowd.

Those were some pretty wild brawls, but they were trying to make things exciting without hurting any of the fans.”

A FIERY NIGHT

Some of ECW’s headliners say that the reason Heyman never seemed to run out of booking ideas was that the top wrestlers themselves booked their own programs. Raven said that the twists and turns of his programs with Dreamer and The Sandman were a collaboration between the wrestlers involved and Heyman himself.

Ravens gimmick was one of the most creative in wrestling, and Raven himself was an incredibly creative person, but some of his ideas had the potential to end in disaster. Witness the October 28, 1995, ECW arena show, which only avoided becoming a crisis thanks to a suggestion from Terry Funk.

The show featured the continuation of the Cactus Jack-Raven-Tommy Dreamer feud with Funk thrown in for good measure. The match was Dreamer with Funk in his corner versus Cactus with Raven in his corner.

After the match, Funk attacked Cactus with a flaming branding iron. Cactus retaliated with a flaming chair. Unfortunately, the chair’s mat came off and flew onto Funk, igniting his back. The flaming patch ended up in the crowd, injuring a ringside fan.

About the same time, the lights went out—not because of a power outage, but because of a Raven angle. The lights were to go out, and when they returned, Dreamer would be crucified near the crows nest where Joey

Styles called the action. However, the darkness only added to the chaos caused by the fire situation, which now had fans coughing from the smoke that was permeating the ringside area.

The result was a near-riot. A couple of fans were hospitalized, as was Funk, who had suffered second-degree burns on his arms and back. Nearly as blistering was the tirade Funk aimed at Foley and anyone else within earshot backstage.

“He was throwing stuff and just screaming at everyone,” ringside photographer George Tahinos said. “My bag of equipment was right there next to his foot, but there was no way I was going to reach down and get it.”

After Funk received treatment for his burns, he quickly reconciled with the targets of his venom, particularly Cactus Jack.

Earlier in the same show, Rocco Rock of The Public Enemy had also suffered burns, when he was power-bombed through a flaming table. Heyman promised fans and wrestlers that fire would never be used in an ECW match again. And for a few months, he actually kept that promise.

Regardless of whether Heyman and Gordon had anticipated the backlash, they knew after the show that they did not want the negative reaction to the angle and the accompanying mishap to spread.

“After it happened, we all went in back, and they got us photographers together, Tod and Shane [Douglas] did, and they said, ‘Please don’t publish pictures of that,”’ said ringside photographer George Tahinos.

The following show in the ECW Arena, Heyman knew he had to make up to the fans for what happened with the fire, the darkness, and the near-riot. The first suggestion was actually Funk’s, who was not slated to return to the building anytime soon. However, because Funk thought it important that fans knew ECW appreciated their support, Funk offered to come in for one last show (for a while at any rate), changing a singles match into an ECW All-Stars tag match of Funk and Dreamer versus Cactus Jack and Raven.

Early in that show, Heyman also offered a gesture aimed at putting the fire incident behind everyone. He got into the ring, took a microphone, and said, “I owe you.”

Then, in what was surely an uncomfortable moment of déjà vu for some, the lights went out. This time, they were only out for a few seconds, and when they came back on, Heyman was no longer in the ring alone. Now flanking him was the man who had embodied the blend of hard work,

athleticism, and insanity that was, in many ways, the best of ECW—Sabu. Sabu, back from the exile that had lasted since his absence from 1995's *The Three-Way Dance* show, was warmly received.

In addition to being the center of controversy more than once, Raven also accomplished something that Heyman never thought possible—he reintroduced a true heel to ECW. ECW crowds had always had favorites, but Heyman's booking had always presented shades of gray as opposed to clear faces and heels.

"I am so proud of what I did for that company," Raven said. "My character became so hated that anyone who fought me was automatically a face, and anyone who helped me was a heel. Prior to that, reactions were all mixed. Paul E. had become convinced that faces and heels were things of the past, and I showed him that was wrong."

But it didn't start that way.

"My first match with Dreamer, it was like I got 80 percent cheers and 20 percent boos," Raven said, "and he did, too."

Dreamer was still not the hardcore hero Heyman was pushing him to be.

"Here was a guy doing everything he could to be a babyface, and those people *hated* him," Raven said. "They knew he was Paul's buddy, and he just started with so many strikes against him. They respected him, because he would take a beating, but they didn't really like him."

Raven said he had to walk a fine line to keep getting the reactions he and Dreamer wanted.

"Starting out, I had to overcome the albatross of Johnny Polo," Raven said. "The next albatross I had was, I was always about to get cheered."

Raven said one way he maintained his heat with the crowd was by holding onto an aspect of the chickenshit heel as a manipulator who threw underlings [The Blue Meanie, Nova, or perennial sidekick Stevie Richards] at Dreamer, but when Raven finally stepped into the ring, he earned fans' respect.

But just before the crowd felt moved to throw its support behind him, Raven would always pull something despicable enough to earn their hatred again. Scott Levy had successfully managed to use traditional heel psychology on an audience that believed itself too sophisticated for such tactics.

“People saw that once I would finally get in there, I didn’t take a step back,” Raven said. “However, just when I would get the crowd to that point, I would do something so insidious that they would all say, Tuck him!’ And that’s the art of a great heel.”

Raven noted that the WWF used the same psychology to turn The Rock into wrestling’s hottest villain in late 1998. The Rock had been garnering increasing amounts of fan cheers in the weeks leading up to 1998’s *Survivor Series* pay-per-view. At the end, just when The Rock looked to be overcoming the Vince McMahon-backed Mick Foley in the finals of a tournament for the WWF championship, The Rock himself turned out to be in the “evil” McMahon’s pocket, transforming “The People’s Champion” into “The Corporate Champion.” In the process, he made himself a more marketable heel than he had ever been.

Raven said stringing fans along to an emotional conclusion was a lesson that was lost on many modern stars.

“That’s what infuriates me about today’s workers,” he said. “They just go out and do a bunch of spots, but none of them means anything in terms of telling a story in the match.”

CHAPTER 7

EXTREME DEFECTION

“This is ECW! you kown the rules—there are no rules!”

–TOD GORDON PRIOR TO A PITBULLS-THE PUBLIC ENEMY DOUBLE COLLAR MATCH IN JUNE 1995

THE WWF AND WCW IN 1995 WERE AT WAR and pay-per-view was the battleground. Both companies went from offering four to five shows a year to a show a month. In 1995, ECW still was not a wrestling juggernaut, but seemed to be a moderately successful smaller company that was heading in the right direction.

And the fans let everyone watching know they kept up with current events in other companies when Ian and Axl Rotten faced off in a vicious strap match. As the two blistered each other with their straps, the crowd chanted, “Hogan sucks!”—a reference to a comparatively weak strap match between Hogan and Vader on a recent WCW show.

Although he saw a link between the two, Raven said the ECW audience was by and large more appreciative of what wrestling was than the “smart fans” of today, who he said micro-analyze everything they see to the extent that they miss the point altogether.

“Back in the old days, you knew you owned people when it was popular with guys sitting in holds,” he said. “And that’s more realistic, because I’ve seen more bar fights end with a facelock than with some spectacular move, but just a couple of years ago, you’d have people chanting, ‘Boring!’ at you. Nowadays, more people understand those holds because Ultimate Fighting Championship is getting more popular.”

Raven said he and Dreamer often played with the fans’ expectations.

“One match, I had one of my 12-step finishes, with Meanie running in, Stevie running in, Beulah running in, and everything else I could think of,” he said. “Now, most matches would have one or two false finishes in them to get the audience going, but we had like 12 of them. After all this interference, as I’m crawling over to cover, the crowd is just going nuts,

because the last thing they want to see is another screwjob finish. I go to pin Tommy, and he kicks out two, and their collective mouths hit the ground.

"What had happened was the fans were smart enough to see things coming. You watch enough wrestling, you know when something's coming. So we made a big point that this was the finish, and when it wasn't, they were pissed, because we'd fooled them, but deep down, they were overjoyed that someone wasn't going to deliver to the lowest common denominator."

Raven said ECW fans grew to expect his unusually creative finishes.

"Eventually, the fans realized I was never going to fuck them," Raven said. "Then, I started to deliver on a different level. It was kind of like the way in the old days when Rie Flair was going an hour, the first 10 to 15 minutes were not much different than the preliminary matches, but the fans never crapped on him, because they knew he was going to deliver. They sat back and waited for the story to unfold. Two preliminary guys doing similar stuff in a 10-minute opening match might get crapped on, because they hadn't proved themselves yet."

The wrestlers themselves also earned the fans' respect, through busting their butts (sometimes literally) in and outside of the ring.

"Those fans were tired of guys just phoning it in," Raven said. "Well, back then they were phoning in because they were working 300-plus shots a year. Nowadays, these guys do 200 at the most, so suffice to say, it was a different era, but those ECW smart fans knew what they wanted. They wanted a better product, and they were going to shit on anything they felt did not live up to that standard. What we have now are smart fans who shit on something just to shit on it—to show how smart they are, but those ECW fans, they legitimately wanted something better."

If ECW was heading down an increasingly bloody path, WCW was heading in the opposite direction. The company in 1995 even fired Dustin Rhodes and Barry "Blacktop Bully" Darsow for violating a "no bleeding on television" rule even though no one thought to edit out the previously taped match in which the bleeding occurred.

TV LIKE THEY HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE

Fans tuning into ECW were watching a TV show unlike any other wrestling show on the air. At this point, ECW's television program was a two-camera shoot, but the production team of Ron Buffone and Charlie Bruzesse turned a fiscal limitation into a creative plus by using unusual camera angles and cuts to make the show look edgy and original.

ECW's two-man production team of Buffone and Bruzesse might be among the most overlooked people in the company's history as pro wrestling trailblazers. The two men would meet ECW talent in the basement of Buffone's family home, where an ECW banner and curtain masked a washer and drier. They would film wrestlers' promos, sometimes not 10 feet away from a woman ironing off-camera, and they spliced together the shows, as well as the music-video vignettes that were among the most original segments in wrestling.

Pay-per-view director Michael Vettor said ECW was groundbreaking out of necessity.

"They didn't have the same money, but in terms of being innovative and feeling like each and every show was something special, ECW kicked the shit out of WCW," Vettor said. "Ron Buffone was the driving force behind all that renegade TV. Without him editing that show weekly in his parents' basement, there would have been no ECW TV Ron's parents opened that house to the guys. What he was able to create on a small computer was unbelievable."

Brett Schwan designed ECW's original website and said the company was also forward-thinking when it came to exploiting that new medium.

"They were the first promotion to really advertise hard on the Internet," Schwan said. "The two big companies had more money to spend on ads."

The early official ECW website was primitive compared to some of the fan sites of today.

"It was pretty much nothing but results from ECW shows, bios of the wrestlers, and the history of the company. They weren't even using the website to sell merchandise back then."

Heyman was a believer in tying edgy popular music to the product in an effort to make ECW look "cool," both through music-video segments and in the music that accompanied wrestlers on their way to the ring.

ECW's use of popular music with an edge was one of the things that most immediately set it apart from WCW and the WWF. A few chords of

the thrashing entrance music of The Pitbulls or The Sandman was all anyone with ears needed to let them know that this was not the family-friendly *Rock and Wrestling Connection* of a decade earlier.

"At a time when Vince was sending [Hulk] Hogan out to corny music that he commissioned himself, we went back to the drawing board," Shane Douglas said. "Whether it was White Zombie, Metallica, or whoever, we used real music with permission, and the fact we were the only company playing music people already knew was one of the things that set us apart from other companies."

"Paul drove Ron and Charlie crazy with some of the things he did," Vettor said. "He would always drive the music so loud that you couldn't hear Joey Styles sometimes, but I guess he was right, because it was about the guys and the music, and Joey was secondary."

No one took more advantage of the innovative musical promo spots than Raven, who continued to develop his brooding villain into a character ECW fans could not help but respect, as much as they professed to hate him.

TROUBLE BREWING

Although ECW had its devoted following, that following was not big enough to keep the company out of the red. Even as ECW was trumpeting its success in Florida, Gordon was telling people ECW's debt had been knocked down to about a "mere" $15,000.

By June 1995, Heyman appeared to have a majority interest in the company, as the paychecks started coming from HHG, a Heyman-owned corporation. For the past several months, Gordon and Heyman had each owned 50 percent of ECW Rumors abounded of dissension between Gordon and Heyman. Gordon tried to downplay those rumors, saying heat between them had been blown out of proportion. There were differences between the partners, however, because Heyman was always looking at ways to expand, while Gordon seemed content for ECW to remain a small regional promotion. Even Heyman was leery of pay-per-view at this point,

fearing ECW's flopping on pay-per-view could mean the death of the company.

As much as ECW was spending on talent, the two big companies could always offer more. Chris Benoit, who had stopped working ECW shows because Heyman never fulfilled his promise to resolve Benoit's visa issues, worked a WWF taping in June 1995, and even ECW's The Franchise was looking to be WWF-bound.

"It was kind of a double-edged sword," Ernie "Stately Wayne Manor" Santilli said. "ECW was a place for guys like Jericho and Benoit to send a valentine to Vince and Bischoff, a place they could get exposure that they really didn't get before, but as soon as they got the attention of the big two companies, they were gone. That's why it was funny to see Benoit as one of the faces of ECW, in that *One Night Stand* pay-per-view Vince had, because the first chance he got, he was off to WCW."

The amount of name talent on most ECW shows in the mid-1990s made apparent that the company was spending a sizable chunk of its earnings on payroll, but more than one person closely associated with the company still wonders today where all the box-office receipts and other income were going. One thing is certain—Heyman was not squandering ECW's money to put himself in the lap of luxury. Heyman drove a plain van to shows instead of flying, and he was obviously not spending a ton of money on his personal wardrobe. Heyman was visible at most shows wearing a black shirt and pants, as well as what had become his signature baseball cap.

THE REPLACEMENT PLAYERS

Heyman was still building new stars. One of his projects involved the overhaul of a long-lived ECW character—The Tazmaniac. The road to repackaging the wildman as a *shooter*, or legitimate wrestler, began one week on television and involved Heyman blurring the line between reality and wrestling storylines more than ever before.

This particular TV show featured an unseen Joey Styles calling the matches as usual, but this week he was joined by unseen guest commentator

Peter Serneca. Serneca described various holds and maneuvers and how they affected the body. He came off as both very articulate and very knowledgeable about wrestling. At the end of the show, Styles appeared on camera and introduced fans to the obviously adept wrestler who had called the matches with him—Peter Serneca was none other than The Tazmaniac, who would now be known as Taz and would put his formidable wrestling skills on display regularly.

In a 1995 interview building up a big match with Too Cold Scorpio, Taz said he was “no fancy music videos, no hype, or hoopla,” and that would define Tazs new no-nonsense approach with which he ascended to the top of ECW.

“He was Paul E.’s creation,” said Kevin Sullivan, who teamed briefly with Taz when he was still known as The Tazmaniac. “He was believable because he was very good, a great athlete with a good athletic background. The change in his character was what ECW was evolving into, so it made a lot of sense.”

Also, Heyman remained on the lookout for new talent. One team that seemed perfect for ECW was toiling in Jim Cornettes Smoky Mountain Wrestling, where they embodied everything Southerners feared about black people. They were top heels Mustafa and New Jack—The Gangstas.

Jim Cornette later accused them of leaving Smoky Mountain without notice, but they debuted for ECW in summer 1995 against The Public Enemy.

The Gangstas were perfect for ECW because they could do the bloody brawl as well as anyone. There was no question about which Gangsta was the captain of the team. If anyone seemed to be cut out to perform for a company called Extreme Championship Wrestling, it was Jerome “New Jack” Young. A former bounty hunter who claimed two kills in the line of duty, Young quickly established New Jack as one of the most violent characters in one of the most violent wrestling promotions in the world, by his willingness to bleed, his original choices of foreign objects as weapons (he would later bring a shopping cart full of appliances and other household objects to turn into implements of destruction), and his willingness to dive from heights that only Sabu (and later Super Crazy) ever approached.

“You know after the show was over, most of the guys were pretty normal like everyone else,” fan John Bailey said. “A couple of them could get a little out of hand, but New Jack was always a little crazy. In the ring,

he always kept us on edges of our seats. He definitely wasn't a guy you yelled, 'Boring!' at."

Many in wrestling talked tough and dangerous, but New Jack left many thinking he was the real deal.

"I've been around wrestlers for decades, and there have been only two people in wrestling I've been afraid of," said Don Laible, a ringside photographer and insider. "That's 'Dr. D' David Schultz and New Jack. I mean he's the real deal. New Jack would talk about being in the joint for this or stabbing this guy, and he was one of the few I always believed when he talked about that stuff."

Fan Mike Aulthouse said he admired the ECW wrestlers, but he also said certain guys brought an aura of real danger to the ring with them, and he put New Jack and Mustafa at the top of that list.

"They were doing a more strong style of matches, and those guys were really laying it on the line," he said. "Wrestlers taking bumps onto flaming tables was something no one had seen in America. That was just the *shit*. But when they brawled through the crowd, you had to move or you'd be run into. The first time I went to an ECW show, I was watching The Public Enemy and The Gangstas. They were brawling in the crowd, and I told my friend, 'Move! They're coming right at us!' He didn't, and they smashed right over him. After it was over, he was saying, 'I can't believe those guys ran me over!' I got waffled a few times over the years, but that was just part of the fun."

The Gangstas and The Public Enemy battled in Tampa during one of ECW's trips to the Sunshine State. The match's aftermath contained one of the more visually memorable (and re-broadcast) moments in ECW's short history, as The Public Enemy invited the fans into the ring, and so many stepped between the ropes that the ring collapsed while they waved their hands from side to side, echoing the motions of their hardcore hip-hop heroes.

The July 1 *Hardcore Heaven 1995* show served to establish Bill Alphonso as one of the company's top heels, as Heyman continued to develop new characters to replace leaving talent.

Alphonso had been one of the top referees for the National Wrestling Alliance in the 1980s, particularly in Florida, and started out reprising that role in ECW. So what made this 130-pound man so hated in ECW? He enforced the rules.

ECW commissioner Tod Gordon said he was tired of Alphonso calling for disqualifications in ECW matches, trying to apply stricter old-school rules to ECW's wild brand of action. (As "commissioner," Gordon played the part of the man who made the decisions in front of the camera. However, behind the scenes Paul Heyman was the man actually calling the shots, both as booker and as ECW owner as of May 5, 1995.) To break him of that habit, Gordon made him the referee for a match in which disqualification was not an option—the Rottens' Taipei Death Match.

Each man had his hands wrapped in double-sided adhesive tape. The taped hands were then dipped into a pile of broken glass. The result was one of the bloodiest matches in ECW history.

Axl Rotten said the best part about the match was the preparation beforehand.

"That was 100 percent real broken glass, and it was all glass from beer bottles," he said. "We had fun making the pile of broken glass to dip our hands into, because first we had to drink all that beer."

The match itself was painful to watch, much less work.

"The one thing Ian and I had was that we trusted each other," Axl said. "We knew we were not out to hurt each other intentionally. It was pretty brutal, because at times we were hitting each other full blast, no holding back whatsoever."

Less than three minutes into the match, however, Alphonso called for the bell and said he was stopping the match because of blood causing a loss of vision for Ian. However, Ian had only a trickle of blood, a far cry from the gore the fans had been expecting.

As the fans cascaded him with boos, Alphonso told them, "You should be glad I'm here!"

But they weren't, because Heyman had successfully turned wrestling psychology on its ear, making someone a heel for doing the same things that made him appear fair-minded and compassionate a decade earlier.

Gordon ultimately ordered the match restarted with a new referee, and the carnage was on. Soon enough, the Rottens were grinding glass-covered knuckles in each other's faces, and thick streams of blood were oozing down their faces and arms. From the looks of things, the match was not nearly as fun as preparing the glass had been.

The finish came when Ian tried to pile-drive his "brother" onto a pile of thumbtacks he had dumped onto the mat. Instead, Axl backdropped Ian

to escape the move, turning lans back into a bloody pincushion.

(That spot was one Mick Foley would re-create in his infamous 1998 *Hell in the Cell* match against The Undertaker [made infamous by Foley's fall from the top of the cage and crash through a ringside table]. In that case, Foley played the part of Ian Rotten, falling prey to his own dumped thumbtacks.)

But Alphonso was not the most surprising heel on the ECW roster in 1995. That distinction would go to Mick "Cactus Jack" Foley. Foley turned on Dreamer to join Raven for the feud referenced in the previous chapter. Cactus found his justification in the sick appetites of the fans, which became a target for his still-eloquent interviews. The interviews he cut after his heel turn would be some of the most intense original promos ever seen in wrestling.

One of the most memorable was a promo in which Foley brought up a moment from his babyface days when he was fighting Terry Funk and saw a sign that read, "Cane Dewey," in reference to his young son. Foley vented genuine disgust over a sign advocating the beating of his small child, but tied it into his new heelish hatred for all things hardcore.

Cactus Jack continued to blend reality and storyline to get over as a heel. He rightly pointed out the damage done to the bodies of the Dynamite Kid and Ray Stevens, whom he called the "original hardcore wrestler." His conclusion was that bloodthirsty ECW fans were killing the wrestlers.

As for Heyman, his response to the defections was to continue building his latest projects. Underdog Mikey Whipwreck continued to pick up steam in August 1995 with an upset win over top heel The Sandman. The stipulation was that the loser would receive lashes with the Singapore cane, which had fans believing they would see a reprise of the Dreamer caning angle. However, Heyman swerved them, because Mikey picked up a fluke pinfall. After the match, The Sandman was reluctant to take his medicine until referee John Molinaro threatened to strip him of his ECW title and award it to Mikey. The Sandman took a couple of shots, but Woman stopped Mikey before he could finish, and The Sandman took advantage of the distraction to cane Mikey senseless.

This caused some backlash, as some TV people were perturbed at Woman's simulated ecstasy at the sight of the violence. Officials at the Sunshine Network voiced outrage, but the conflict ultimately subsided, and the two sides stayed in business together.

Dana Stites, an executive with Florida's Sunshine Network during the 1990s, said her network was like many—perfectly happy to deal with content problems, as long as the checks cleared.

"They told me it was extreme, and it certainly was extreme," Stites said. "It certainly was a success, but it was what it was. The big boys were out there but ECW had an audience. All the networks aired those shows on a cash-barter basis, and the networks were like everyone else. They were in it for the bucks."

Stites said the network occasionally refused to run a show if content issues could not be worked out. Sometimes, those issues were almost beyond ECW's control, particularly when it came to the fans and their variety of vulgar chants.

"Controlling wrestlers is one thing, but controlling the audience is another," Stites said. "But even there I don't think ECW had the stuff that later gave a lot of people problems with the little kids giving wrestlers the bird. With ECW, it was mostly language and storylines. We had to call them numerous times to tell them there was something on the tape we just weren't going to air. They usually sent us a new tape if time allowed. If not, we would generally just re-air the last show that we had in house."

At the same time, WCW was in the last planning stages of the move that would escalate the U.S. wrestling war—the debut of WCW *Monday Nitro*, airing directly opposite the WWF's flagship show, *Monday Night Raw*. The first *Nitro* featured the surprise debut of Lex Luger, who had been a WWF star for the past three years. Two days earlier, Luger had worked a show for the WWF and claimed he was about to sign an extension to stay there.

The second *Nitro* on September 11, 1995, featured a face ECW fans were very familiar with—Sabu. Sabu was still a daredevil, even though his act was severely toned down from what ECW fans had seen. Ultimately Sabu and WCW proved to be a poor fit, and Sabu would return to ECW in November after the aforementioned fire-chair incident involving Terry Funk and Cactus Jack.

As Sabu, the longtime standard-bearer for ECW, made his WCW debut, a veteran WCW star, Steve Austin, finally made his ECW debut, only nine months later than originally advertised. "Stunning" Steve became "Superstar" Steve, and it was quickly clear that WCW had squandered a rare talent by misusing and then releasing Austin. Austin debuted on

television, doing quasi-shoot interviews about Eric Bischoff (who had fired him over the phone while Austin was out injured). Austin had never done much behind a microphone, but his promos in ECW were nothing short of electric. Austin only stayed for a few months, but he clearly saw something he liked in The Sandman gimmick. When Austin became a phenom in the WWF a few years later, it was as “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, a beer-drinking hell-raiser. The Sandman and his fans must have thought something looked very familiar about the gimmick.

Fans at the September 23, 1995, show in Middletown, New York, caught Austins second ECW appearance. Austin confronted Whipwreck and The Sandman and gave what sounded like an early “Stone Cold” interview, calling both wrestlers “son” and referring to “sumbitches.”

Heyman later credited Austin with the idea to have Austin lose his title match to Whipwreck. Austin later delivered a great interview, saying that he had never had a chance at the world title while in WCW, and in ECW he came close before falling short. Austin conveyed his anguish in a promo that was one of the first signs of his heretofore undiscovered talking ability.

EXTREME AIR

August 1995 saw ECW lose Chris Benoit for good, as well as Dean Malenko and Eddy Guerrero. The latter two bowed out after a fantastic best-of-three-falls draw that remains one of the more fondly remembered matches in ECW’s history. Malenko, Guerrero, and Benoit had all reached deals with WCW that would also allow them to continue their lucrative Japanese tours. And Benoit would never have to worry about visa problems again.

The losses didn’t stop there. The night before Malenko and Guerrero’s last match, Ian Rotten quit the company and ended up forming his own independent group, IWA Mid-South Wrestling.

ECW had been more than just wild brawls. It also had delivered some of the best technical wrestling matches in the United States. However, many of those matches featured Benoit, Malenko, and Guerrero, all of whom

were now part of WCW. Heyman was looking for something else that would set ECW apart, as had the pure wrestling that WCW had co-opted.

Heyman began talking to Charles "Konnan" Ashenoff, Mexico's biggest star and a booker for AAA, a young upstart league that had quickly become one of the country's top promotions.

Konnan and Heyman were no strangers. They first met at WCW's December 1990 *Starrcade* pay-per-view. Konnan said they hit it off immediately. Konnan was one of many international stars brought in for a one-night tag tournament. Konnan's partner that night was the original Rey Misterio, uncle of the masked flier you can see on WWE's *Smackdown!* program today.

"I thought Paul E. was very funny," Konnan said. "I even gave him a joke to use on me when he called my match. It was my mother was Cuban and my dad was Puerto Rican, and they met while trying to pick each other's pockets."

A couple of years later, Konnan was on a tour of Singapore, as were Heyman, Kevin Sullivan, and Johnny Grunge.

Heyman asked about the incredibly hot heel team Konnan was booking in Mexico's AAA promotion, Los Gringos Locos. The result, following Barr's death, was Guerreros brief stint in 1994.

A year later Konnan contacted ECW and also offered Heyman the use of masked marvels Rey Misterio and Psicosis.

"I told him, 'You bring them in, I guarantee they'll blow away anything else you have on the show,'" Konnan said. "He literally called me the night of the show and said, 'You were right! They were *incredible!*"'

Misterio and Psicosis had a whirling dervish of a match, an almost nonstop flurry of high-flying that astonished even ECW fans. Many of the wrestlers watched, and some picked up ideas for flashy moves to try themselves.

But most of the ECW audience had never seen anything like the spectacular action the luchadors provided. Konnan, who also came as a wrestler, said being in front of the ECW Arena crowd was as new for him as lucha was to the audience.

"I had never been in front of a hardcore audience in my life," Konnan said. "In Mexico, *hardcore* meant all they wanted was to see some blood. This was a whole different species. I got some respect for being the champion from Mexico, but I hit my opponent once with a chairshot that

wasn’t too hard, and they turned on me. These guys were for real. There was some respect, but at the same time it was like, ‘When you’re here, you play by our rules.’ It was a very smart crowd that knew what they wanted and could dictate what they wanted.”

WORLD WRESTLING FRANCHISED

Shane Douglas also quit the company, going to the WWF. It was a move he would later call one of the worst mistakes of his career.

“I would never have left. I was one of the ones who ‘drank the Kool-Aid,’ as the saying goes. I believed in ECW,” Douglas said. “When I left [the WWF] in 1990, it was because my dad had emphysema. Vince, who had always treated me well and paid me well, told me the door was always open if I ever wanted to return. Fast-forward to 1995, and [McMahon lieutenant] Pat Patterson started calling me. I would listen to his spiel and then say, ‘Pat, I really appreciate it, but I like where I am now.’”

Douglas was one of the exceptions—he didn’t call them; they called him. After a few attempts by Patterson, talent executive Jim Ross called Douglas and implied the generous offer might not be on the table for much longer.

“He said timing was everything, that they could put Vince’s magic to my ECW character,” Douglas said. “Once I started listening to their bullshit, they really roped me in.”

McMahon was used to getting his way, and Douglas said the WWF recruiting machine was smooth. In casual conversation, Douglas mentioned his wife was a fan of Broadway plays. When they went to New York to talk about Douglas coming to work for the WWF, they found a pair of front-row tickets to *Miss Saigon* waiting for them at the hotel.

“They had it down to a science,” he said.

Douglas’ wife accompanied him to the contract meeting with McMahon, who told them both what a tremendous opportunity this could be before asking her what she thought.

She told McMahon, “My husband worked here five years ago, and your people said they couldn’t think of anything for him. Right now, I have

my husband at home five nights a week, *and he s* making $100,000 a year from ECW and another $45,000 teaching. What can you offer us that's going to be better than *that?*"

Douglas said McMahons response still stuck in his craw a decade later.

"He took my wife's hand and said, 'You have my word as a gentleman —I will make your husband a very wealthy man,'" Douglas said.

McMahon went on to say that it would not be unusual for someone in the slot he planned for Douglas to earn between $350,000 and $550,000 a year.

Douglas, who grew up in the Pittsburgh projects, said he was stunned by the lavish courting. But from the bottle of Dom Perignon waiting for him and his wife after they returned to their Plaza Hotel suite from *Miss Saigon* to the clothes fittings to the massive chocolate-covered strawberries delivered to the suite, something was not sitting right with Douglas.

"Something deep inside me said, 'Don't trust him,' but I looked at it and thought, 'If he's trying to fuck me here, he's sparing no expense to do it,'" Douglas said.

Douglas called practically everyone he knew who had worked for the WWF to see what they thought.

"I talked to the Road Warriors, I talked to Jake Roberts, and I talked to about 10 more guys, and they all said, 'That's pretty much what he told us, and he made us rich,'" Douglas said.

Douglas took the deal despite the feeling still knotted in his gut. He was renamed Dean Douglas and given the gimmick of being an evil schoolteacher. The gimmick was a lousy one, and less than 48 hours after starting in the WWF, Douglas felt as if he'd been set up to fail.

"I was known as a guy who was good on the mike," Douglas said. "However, the first time I was to go in and do promos, I was standing there ready to go, and this stuff started crawling down a screen in front of me. I said, 'What's that?' They said, 'That's your promo.'"

The WWF braintrust had ECW's master of the quasi-shoot promo sputtering cliches about the ring being his classroom. One of his first experiences producing promos told him everything he needed to know about the WWF officials. After Douglas did a number of videotaped promos in the monotone voice McMahon had prescribed, Douglas, who described himself as "bored out of my skull, by that point," convinced McMahon to let him try the last promo again his own way. He read the

same words, but used dramatic inflection and even the arrogant Franchise laugh.

McMahon had to take a telephone call as soon as Douglas was finished. While he was gone, Douglas asked the agents in the room what they thought—every one of them said they loved Douglas' retake.

When McMahon re-entered the room, he said, "I appreciate you trying it, but I still think it works better my way."

McMahon asked the agents what they thought.

"Of course, every single one of them did a 180 and said they agreed with Vince," Douglas said. "When I left that night, the first thing I did was call Paul Heyman, and I said, 'Paul, get me the fuck out of here.'"

Douglas also found himself out of favor, because the Shawn Michaels-Kevin Nash clique, which seemed to rule the WWF wrestlers, was always maneuvering to keep its members in featured roles. Unfortunately, Douglas was not a member, and he ended up not being nearly as featured a player as he had been promised.

In 1995, the WWF had not yet started offering big guaranteed contracts. Wrestlers were paid in large part based on their spot in the roster, which meant that the de-emphasis on him equaled paychecks that were far lower than what McMahon had promised him.

"I spent four months on the road, never any time at home, and I was able to deposit a grand total of $6,400 during that period," Douglas said. "My wife was getting furious. Every time we talked, she would ask, 'So where is all this money:

After the four-month mark, Douglas decided he'd had enough of not having nearly enough.

"I went to Vince and said, 'We've got a major fucking problem. I've got to give you my notice,'" Douglas said. "Vince couldn't believe it. He looked at me and said, 'But I've got a million dollars invested in this character!' I said, '*Where?* It sure as shit isn't in the pay!'"

A decade later, Douglas still holds some bitterness over his WWF experience.

"I understand everyone has to make a living, but when you fuck someone just to make a dollar, that's something else entirely," he said. "Fm not perfect. I'm certainly no saint, but I can honestly say that there's no one out there who can say I deliberately fucked them over. There was never a time when I promised to do something and lied to screw someone."

A MOVING CONSPIRACY?

ECW celebrated Independence Day weekend in 1995 by adding Greenbelt, Maryland, to its growing array of TV outlets. WCW celebrated by replacing Rie Flair as its booker. Flairs replacement? Kevin Sullivan. As his wife, Nancys continued presence in ECW sparked speculation among some ECW fans (and even a few within the company) that she had something to do with the ECW stars who were migrating to the Turner-owned company.

Kevin Sullivan's response to that?

"That's bullshit," he said, adding that WCW never needed an undercover operative in ECW.

Sullivan was not the only one to make a Heyman-WCW connection. WWE's revisionist history paints Vince McMahon as a silent supporter of ECW, as someone who put money into the company, but more than one person who knew all three men said that for much of the mid-1990s, both McMahon and WCW boss Eric Bischoff were paying Heyman as an unofficial talent consultant and developer.

People close to Heyman at the time believed the two big companies had Heyman on a form of retainer, so he could serve as a sort of informal talent adviser. Heyman's relationship with WCW gave WCW wrestler Brian Pillman the inspiration to pull off something in 1996 that would transform the idea of working in the wrestling industry.

However, Konnan said Nancy helped to recruit at least one ECW talent —Konnan himself.

"It was hard for me to leave, but the second week I was there, Woman told Kevin [Sullivan] about me and then she told me, 'He wants you to work alongside Hulk Hogan,'" Konnan said. "I knew this would be an opportunity to make a lot of money, and I was told I would be working alongside Hulk, in this kind of Mexico-U.S. superpowers angle. They were offering really good money, and when I asked if I could bring my boys [Misterio, La Parka, Psicosis, and the rest of the workhorses] with me, she said, 'Yeah.'"

Konnan said telling Paul Heyman about his plans to depart for WCW was one of the hardest moves of his professional life.

“I know a lot of people talk this and that about him, but Paul E. never lied to me,” Konnan said. “He was always great, and he was almost like my mentor by osmosis. When I was booking in Mexico, I brought acts back there and told Paul E. what I was booking. I remember him sitting there and telling me why this would work or this wouldn’t work. He taught me so much.”

Heyman did not take Konnan’s departure well, and Konnan said years passed before the two patched things up, even though he gave notice, unlike many who jumped from one company to another in the 1990s.

“I told Paul, It’s nothing against you, but they’ve offered me too much money to turn down,’ and he was pretty mad about it,” Konnan said. “I really believe that after me and Sullivan got into a fight in WCW, he buried me to Paul E. It ended up that Rey Misterio Jr. was the one who patched everything up between us. He told Paul, If anyone else buried him to you, they’re bullshitting.’ We patched it up to where we’re on really good terms right now.”

In early 1996, Woman was on her way to WCW. Heyman booked an exit angle for her in which she would try to “recruit” The Sandman and Too Cold Scorpio to go with her. Instead, they carried her out of the ECW Arena, dumping her outside.

A NEW FAMILY ACT

In addition to juggling departures and debuts of name talent, Heyman and ECW were cultivating some new acts. One of them originated as a Raven idea, a comedy faction based on the Hanson brothers of the 1976 Paul Newman hockey movie *Slap Shot*. They were the Dudleys, and over time they developed from low-level comic relief into the top heel act in ECW. The idea was the group all shared a common father, a traveling wrestler. The originals were Dudley Dudley and Snot Dudley, but the family grew to include Dances With Dudley (Daddy Dudley apparently made a stop at a reservation), Chubby Dudley, menacing “Big” Dick Dudley, and the silent Sign Guy Dudley.

The Dudleys ultimately pared down to the wrestling duo of Buh Buh Ray and D-Von, with Sign Guy and “Big” Dick Dudley complementing the “brother” tag team at ringside. And if Raven awoke the concept of a true heel to ECW fans, the Dudleys took heelwork to an unprecedented level. They became heat magnets and incited fans into fury.

The Dudleys and other wrestlers would work the arena, never staying within the confines of the ring, which posed a serious challenge to the people in charge of maintaining order, the security staff.

“I told my guys, ‘You know going in what this is going to be. These people are trained to get crazy, to bring things,’” said Stu Kaplan, who runs the Boston-based company Stuart Security, which helped run security for ECW when it ran in the Boston area. “A couple of shows, we did patdowns at the front door, for knives and things like that. It was OK for them to bring in a hockey stick or a computer keyboard. We never really had anything that was out of control. It was like they knew when to stop, because they didn’t want to get thrown out. Even on last match, they wanted to hang out with wrestlers after the show. They knew if they were stupid they might get told once, and then they were getting thrown out.”

Different wrestlers brought different security concerns, as security was always charged with keeping the fan participation that distinguished ECW from turning into a dangerous situation.

“You always knew what you had with the Dudleys, Buh Buh and D-Von, Balls Mahoney, and guys like that. You knew they were going out of ring, so before their match would even start, we’d have guys at all four corners of the building. You knew The Sandman was going to go through the crowd for his ring entrance, so we were set up for it. We never had anybody working there that we were really worried about. We knew Sabu was going to fly out in the front row at some point—same thing with RVD. With the Japanese and Mexican guys, you knew they were going to do moves and end up on the outside of the ring. We were always prepared for it, so nothing ever surprised me.

UNHAPPINESS IN THE ECW CLAN

Some ECW talent became perturbed when Heyman bounced a series of checks in October 1995. Heyman promised he would make good on them, and he did. Still, the initial check-bouncing was an ill omen of things to come.

Also looking at bolting for more money were the two men who comprised Heymans first project in ECW—The Public Enemy. The way Heyman protected them, the two were seen as a great tag team, and their Sabu-influenced table spots were creating a lot of buzz in the wrestling world. Johnny Grunge and Rocco Rock were fielding offers from both WCW and the WWF, before deciding in 1996 to go with WCW (whose original idea was to change their name to The Mack Daddies).

At the time, it seemed inconceivable that a team that so embodied Heyman's vision of what ECW was would ever work for any other company, much less one of the mainstream promotions that ECW vilified weekly. Losing renowned wrestlers like Chris Benoit and Dean Malenko was one thing, but Grunge and Rocco Rock were homegrown stars. In the aforementioned Tampa match against The Gangstas, which culminated in the ring breaking under the collective weight of dozens of fans, Joey Styles noted in his commentary that The Public Enemy were "custom-made for Extreme Championship Wrestling. It's hard to imagine them wrestling for anyone else."

The newsletter-reading fan base kept up with the developments in the teams contract talks with WCW and chanted, "Please don't go!" at The Public Enemy at more than one show.

ECW hardly ever advertised full lineups ahead of time with the company itself being the bulk of the draw. By pushing ECW as a brand over almost any piece of talent, Heyman found he was not as dependent on often-mercurial pro wrestlers.

"The reason they never advertised matches was that whoever showed up was on the show," Don Laible said.

The losses would continue to mount with Mick Foley talking with WWF officials about starting there after March 1996's *Wrestlemania* show.

The frustration in many fans was evident in a letter in the November 20, 1995, issue of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* in which Cathy Collins of Mount Laurel, New Jersey, bemoaned the loss of Sabu, Benoit, Douglas, and Malenko.

"What we have left are a bunch of Dudleys," she wrote.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

While all of this was going on, Jim Cornette announced the closing of Smoky Mountain Wrestling. Options for wrestlers and wrestling fans continued to shrink.

Cornette and Heyman were both ringside photographers who got into the business itself as ringside managers. Both were highly intelligent individuals and bookers for the companies they owned in the 1990s, but that was where the similarities ended. Cornette believed in traditional methods of using psychology to get the best possible reaction from fans. Heyman believed in pushing the envelope.

Tracy Smothers said he noticed another huge difference between the booking styles of the two men shortly after he started with ECW in 1996.

“Jimmy was more set in his ways—he was going to decide how to do it, and that was it. Paul was more open to ideas from other people. Jimmy would have stuff planned out three to four months ahead of time, while Paul would tinker and change things as he went along every week,” Smothers said. “There are pros and cons to both ways of doing things, but Paul was always more in tune with the people, I thought. Jim would run a show in Smoky Mountain with The Undertaker, and that act wouldn’t play there in front of those Southern fans. Jimmy didn’t seem to understand that he wasn’t from there.”

Another more vocal difference was between the Southern fans Smothers had become used to and the bloodthirsty hardcores in the ECW audience. People in the wrestling business traditionally used the carny term *marks* to refer to the fans whose money made the business go round. A *mark* is someone who is falling for the con, and wrestling *marks* were people who believed in what they were seeing to the extent that they would buy tickets to see their heroes and heels square off. The 1980s had seen an increasing prevalence of wrestling newsletters, which openly discussed the manipulated business that wrestling was. The result was a new breed of fan —the *smart mark.*

Smothers said he first heard the rise of the smart fan in the crowd reactions to matches between The Southern Boys and The Midnight Express in the summer of 1990. However, ECW fans took being smart to a

new level, even loudly pointing out when a wrestler messed up a planned spot.

"The 'You fucked up!' chants, the 'Shut the fuck up!' chants; those people were out of their minds," Smothers said. "They were all smart marks. I mean they were smart to *everything"*

However, as someone who studied his wrestling craft in the Southern United States, where bookers relied heavily on ring psychology, Smothers quickly figured out what a number of ECW performers eventually did. He figured out that it was still possible to push the buttons of those fans to elicit a reaction.

"Sometimes," Smothers said, "I'd yell out into the crowd, 'Hey motherfucker, you're not calling this match—I am! I don't go to Burger King and bother *you* at work!'"

Francine said she saw the verbal abuse as part of the job.

"The chants didn't bother me, because for most of my career, I was a heel," Francine said. "So if they hated me, that meant that I was doing my job well. Some of the chants that they made up were good, especially the Philly fans. They were very creative!"

Steve Corino, who wrestled with the company from late 1998 to the company's death in 2001, said he never held the chant against the fans.

"I only ever heard it about three times, and each time, I got them off of it pretty quickly, but that was the ECW fans. That's what they do. It would be easy to say, 'They've never been in the ring, so they don't know what they're talking about,' but no one's ever perfect, and that audience wanted perfection. I thought they had every right to chant it. It definitely kept you on your game."

John "Hat Guy" Bailey said the "You fucked up!" chants were not meant as damning indictments.

"It was just something fans yelled," he said. "It wasn't malicious. If you were a true fan, you had respect for all the guys, probably. And fucking up was easily forgiven; it was just something to yell."

Fan Mike Aulthouse said that while ECW fans could be brutal to performers slipping up in the ring, he was always glad to be part of a crowd that respected effort in the ring and for veteran wrestlers who had paid decades worth of dues.

"I was there when there was top-notch talent and it was $20 for front-row tickets. The crowd was so into it," Aulthouse said. "Watching all those

top-notch guys was the best thing, because the mid-1990s was a time when wrestling was on a downward spiral. And these guys were putting on such a great show in front of no more than 1,000 people. Every month, there would be some kind of surprise, and a lot of the guys were wrestlers who had been written off and came in and got the respect of fans, which meant something, because these were informed wrestling fans."

However, Raven said that many of the wrestlers did not have reciprocal feelings for the fans, particularly the ultra-critical fans of the ECW Arena.

"I love how those fans are being remembered fondly in all these nostalgic interviews. *'Oh, those were the greatest fans in the world!* Well, when I got there in 1995, the guys *hated those* fans, because the fans knew what was coming in their matches, and a lot of the boys were just not smart enough to get around that," Raven said. "The boys used to bitch all the time about the Philadelphia fans. A lot of them hated going to Philadelphia."

Terry Funk said not even the most respected veterans got free passes from the fans, because wrestlers continually upped the ante and raised expectations.

"I was thrilled when the other guys would go out and have great matches, but there was also some pressure, because I knew I would have to follow these guys who were out there killing themselves to put on a great show," Funk said. "I mean, do you think I enjoyed doing backflips off the top rope at 54 years old? Hell, no!"

C.W. Anderson was one of ECW's hardest-working performers from his 1999 debut to the company's 2001 demise. He said the fans could be tough, but he learned to appreciate the challenge of putting on a good match for them even though the ECW crowd was different than any other in wrestling.

"Even with all their chants, I didn't have that big of a problem with it," Anderson said. "I found that if I gave everything I had each night, those fans appreciated that I was busting my ass. The first couple of shows I was on, I did a couple of heel spots that had worked for me in the independents, like the dummy run."

The *dummy run* was a comical spot in which Anderson would criss-cross the ring, bouncing from rope to rope, while his in-ring opponent did likewise. However, the opponent would soon stop. Anderson, playing the role of befuddled heel, would continue, while the other wrestler stared with

amusement. It was a spot that Southern fans enjoyed. ECW fans did not, at least, not initially.

"They would boo the hell out of me," Anderson said, "and it's not like a heel wants to get booed."

Later, when he had gotten over with the fans through his intense work in the ring, he found he was able to do some of his old-school spots, including the dummy run.

"Once I got over and then went back and did that spot, they gave me a standing ovation," he said. "It was like I had to earn the right to do stuff like that. The one thing I always strived for was to work hard enough that the fans never could say, 'C.W. had a bad match.'"

CATCHING ON

No matter what show they were attending, ECW fans remained unabashed. At the WWF's December 1995 *In Your House* pay-per-view broadcast from Hershey, Pennsylvania, visible crowd signs included "Gangstas rule," "911," and of course "ECW." It was the WWF's second Pennsylvania pay-per-view of the year and the second in which ECW fans made themselves seen and heard. Their level of devotion was not lost on WWF owner Vince McMahon.

WCW, taking a page from ECW, was blending its own storylines with reality, particularly when WCW (or company head Eric Bischoff) could take a swipe at the WWF in the process. The December 18, 1995, episode of *Nitro* featured a bizarre mirror image of the 1991 WWF shows in which Rie Flair wore the NWA title belt. Madusa, formerly known as WWF women's champ Alundra Blayze, said the WWF was garbage and illustrated her point by tossing the belt into a trash can.

All the while, ECW's expansion continued, with the company setting a record in a December 1995 show in Queens, New York. The show drew 1,285 fans and a record box-office gate of $27,410.

The fan base still was not growing enough to make most shows moneymakers, though. It appeared that the very "extreme" elements that made the small fan base so fanatical also limited its growth. The most far-

out spots were also the things that outsiders keyed in on when noticing ECW. In February 1996, the TV show *A Current Affair* ran a piece on ECW, describing ECW as making a major run at the WWF and WCW. As if to emphasize its point about ECW's violence, the show ran a clip of Styles talking about the scientific wrestling in ECW, followed immediately by a clip of a frying pan shot to the head.

And three months later, not long after getting on the air in Denver, the station carrying ECW pulled it from its airwaves, citing viewer complaints over the "extreme" content.

Still, the big companies were aping elements of ECW's style, and ECW was quick to point to any similarity as proof that the company was the wrestling business' only true innovator. In a January 1996 letter to the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, announcer Joey Styles wrote about the WWF's December 1995 pay-per-view, in which Bret Hart ended up a bloody mess in his main event against Davey Boy Smith.

"I give *In Your House* the middle finger," Styles wrote. "How dare they refer to ECW as barbaric only to emulate us when their buyrates slide."

CHAPTER 8

HOUSE PARTY 1996—ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

“I hate to sound like a used-car salesman, or some huckster, a la Mean’ Gene Okerlund, but when you buy a front-row ticket for an ECW show, you get your money’s worth. I mean where else does this happen?”

–JOEY STYLES AT PARTY 1996

AS NOTED PREVIOUSLY, the first ECW show of 1995 had been a significant one. But compared to the show that kicked off 1996 for ECW, the previous year’s event was a night of tranquility.

House Party 1996 was ECW’s first show of the year, but it was the last show for The Public Enemy. After they defeated longtime rivals The Gangstas in their finale, the tag team spent nearly as much time telling the fans goodbye as they had wrestling.

“You can take us out of the ECW,” Rocco Rock promised, “but you’ll never fuckin’ take the ECW out of us!”

The Public Enemy got a last rousing ovation from the fans. (Two days later, The Public Enemy got off to an inauspicious start, as Ted “Rocco Rock” Petty found himself snowed in and unable to leave New Jersey, so the team missed its planned *Nitro* debut.)

For another noteworthy departure, the fans were not as gracious. In his last ECW appearance before he, too, left for the waiting arms of World Championship Wrestling, Konnan still went all-out, starting with mat wrestling before getting into an intense brawl with The Sandman outside the ring. He didn’t get much appreciation from the fans for his efforts. The ECW Arena crowd doused Mexico’s top star with derisive chants of “Sandman’s gonna kill you!” and “Bye-bye, Konnan!” Even though The Sandman was officially the heel, Konnan reacted to the chants and worked

as a heel in the match. After the match, even Konnan left on a high note, by telling the fans The Sandman was the one true champion in wrestling.

(Ultimately, Konnan said he found WCW and his place in it to be anything but what was promised.

“They put the U.S. strap on me, but the politics were unreal, and it was obvious pretty soon that I was not going to get anywhere near Hogan.”)

Konnan said he did not think much of The Sandman initially, but grew to respect him and what he meant to the ECW fans.

“I had heard about him going in drunk, but I didn’t think that much about it,” he said. “I mean these guys are doing insane things out there, and here’s The Sandman, drinking a case of beer before he goes out to the ring. Nancy told me before the match if it gets out of hand, to just put him in his place, but he was great to work with. The first time I ever looked at The Sandman, I just thought, ‘What the fuck is this?’ I didn’t understand the character, but Paul said it was a taste you had to acquire.”

The appeal of The Sandman, Konnan came to realize, was that many of the fans could see themselves in him.

“The Sandman was the guy sitting behind the rail, watching the matches,” Konnan said. “He had no problem having a beer after the matches with a guy who’d been telling him to go fuck himself earlier. A lot of wrestlers are too aloof, but he was willing to sit and shoot the shit. And he had no problem putting his body on the line for those fans, and that, to me, showed the love he had for the sport. There’s not too many top WWF stars who would do the things to themselves he was doing or that Tommy Dreamer was doing. These were the top guys in the company, putting it all on the line. Guys like Edge and Christian did some of that stuff, but they were not the big stars when they did those ladder matches. ECW started that trend of more and more insane bumps.”

The Sandman was also one of many team players in ECW, whose performers had an unusual (if not unique) approach to wins and losses in the ego-fueled worlds of professional wrestling.

“The Sandman represented what was important about ECW, and that was that most of the guys never had a problem with doing jobs,” said ring announcer Bob Artese. “The guys were always for what was good for the company. The one I was impressed with the most was Sandman, because he never had a problem putting anyone over. What he cared about was always

what would benefit ECW, and he didn't care if he was pinned or what happened."

A STAR IS REBORN

In the second match of the night, Axl Rotten faced a debuting Rob Van Dam. Van Dam trained under The Sheik, the uncle of Sabu, although The Sheik never flew around like Van Dam did. The former Rob Szatkowski combined high-flying and a martial-arts motif to make for one of the more unique ring styles in the business. However, his talent at projecting a snotty heel was clear, because he was good enough at it that even his spectacular style did not keep him from getting boos.

Rotten said that the Rob Van Dam he faced that night was a far cry from the supremely confident "Whole Fuckin Show" Van Dam would come to be.

"I was given Rob to work with because Paul saw potential in him but knew he wouldn't get over with what he was doing, and the only way to get him over was to put him in there with someone who knew what the crowd expected," Rotten said. "Seriously, I've done lot of things in ECW that get glossed over. To be honest, initially Rob had no clue what was going on."

In an effort to give fans something to remember besides the departures, Heyman also cooked up an angle in which Beulah would announce she was pregnant by Tommy Dreamer. The angle turned into Dreamer's first real measure of revenge, because he took Raven's girl and beat him up. Still, the continuing element in the feud was that Dreamer could not pin Raven in a match, and that theme would continue for more than another year.

House Party also featured the return of Shane Douglas, who received as thunderous a "Dean is dead!" chant as 1,150 fans could muster. Douglas quickly reminded fans why he was The Franchise they loved to hate, by slapping the pudgy, popular Buh Buh Ray Dudley (the clan's newest addition) and vowing to teach the stuttering star to speak proper English.

"I thought that coming back would give me a really good chance to get over as a heel in ECW—better than I ever had before—because I played it as if I wasn't glad to be back, but pissed off that I had to come back,"

Douglas said, laughing. “Those ‘Dean is dead!’ chants were really great, but the way we played it, I turned those chants into ‘Fuck you!’ chants before long.”

Another ECW insider said the best part of Douglas’ return was that it was not in the original plans for *House Party*.

Although Douglas had given his notice to McMahon, making clear he wanted to be gone, he was still technically under contract. The day of *House Party*, Douglas called Heyman repeatedly, echoing his “Get me out of here!” pleas that began months earlier. He finally told Heyman that he was coming to the ECW Arena that night.

Backstage, while Van Dam was making his in-ring debut, Douglas was asking Heyman to let him make a run-in at some point on the show. Heyman told Douglas that would be a great way for both of them to get sued by the WWF.

Heyman called WWF executive Bruce Prichard and told him to get Vince McMahon in touch with Heyman. Minutes later, Heyman was talking to the WWF owner.

Heyman told McMahon that he was about to solve a problem for both men. McMahons interest piqued; Heyman told him Douglas was backstage, ranting about how McMahon lied to him and his wife about what Douglas would earn and that Heymans solution was simple: He would take Douglas off of McMahons hands and bring him back into ECW, but Douglas had to start that very night.

“You want him?” McMahon asked.

“Yeah!” Heyman replied.

“He’s all yours.”

Years later, after business differences with Heyman that turned very bitter, Douglas would still credit Heyman as brilliantly creative, saying the difference between “wrestling geniuses” Heyman and McMahon was as simple as the difference between Dean Douglas and The Franchise.

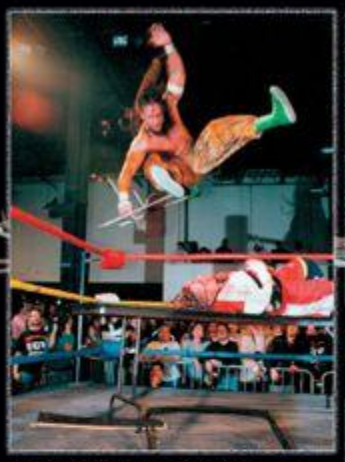
House Party 1996 was the first show after which Cactus Jack had gone public with his pending departure for the WWF. Mick Foley’s unconventional look, unique interviews, and suicidal brawling style made him a natural fit in ECW. Now, the prototypical counterculture wrestler was joining the corporate machine that was the WWF.

Cactus Jack’s last two ECW appearances, March 8 and 9, 1996, could not have been more different. The New York crowd on March 8 razzed

Mick Foley like it was going out of style, while the Philadelphia crowd the next night gave him a hero's exit. That night, Foley himself remarked at the warm reception, particularly in the face of the anti-ECW fan promos he had been cutting for the past few months.

ECW fan John "Hat Guy" Bailey said Cactus Jack had been an example of the bond between ECW wrestlers and their fans.

"After the shows, we usually went to the Holiday Inn right around the corner. The last night Cactus Jack was in, we were in my room, having a couple of beers. Foley said, 'You'll never be John to me. You'll always be Hat Guy' Terry Funk once told me that when he didn't see me at ringside anymore, that would be when he retired. I thought that was really nice. Of course, I didn't realize he'd retired 100 times already."



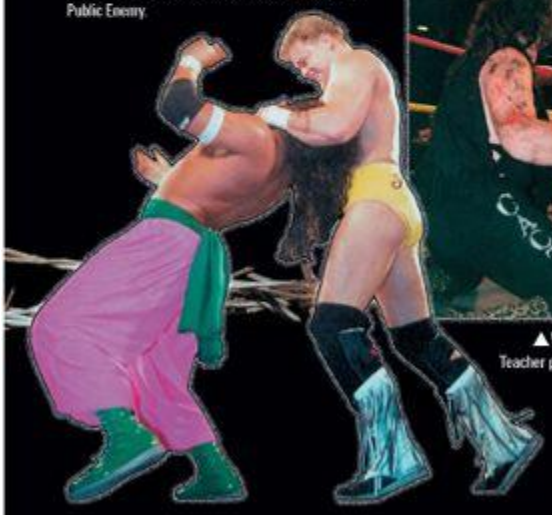
▲ HOMICIDAL, SUICIDAL, GENOCIDAL: In a violent meeting of two table-spot innovators, Sabu delivers an Arabian Facebuster onto Johnny Grunge of The Public Enemy.



▲ RAVEN'S PERCH: The brooding darkness of the Raven character made Scott Levy one of wrestling's most complex villains.



▲ WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE: Teacher pummels student, as "Hardcore Legend" Terry Funk battles close friend Cactus Jack.



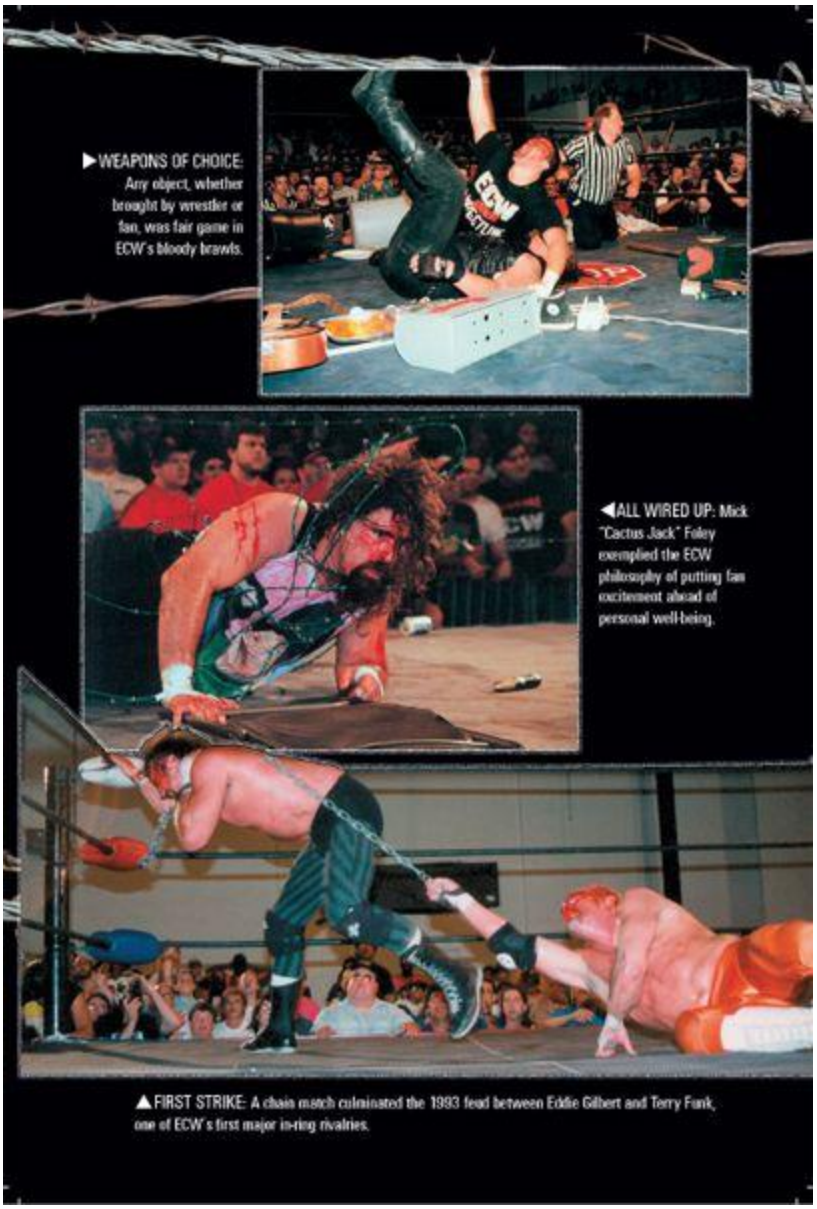
▲ ICONS BATTLE: Shane "Franchise" Douglas punishes Sabu during *The Three-Way Dance* of 1994 (also featuring Terry Funk), which would become one of the most influential matches of the decade.



◀FACE-OFF: Paul E. Dangerously (Heyman) bends Terry Funk's ear, with ECW founder Tod Gordon caught between them.

▲MAN VERSUS BEAST: The Rob Van Dam–Rhino feud was just taking off when ECW withered.

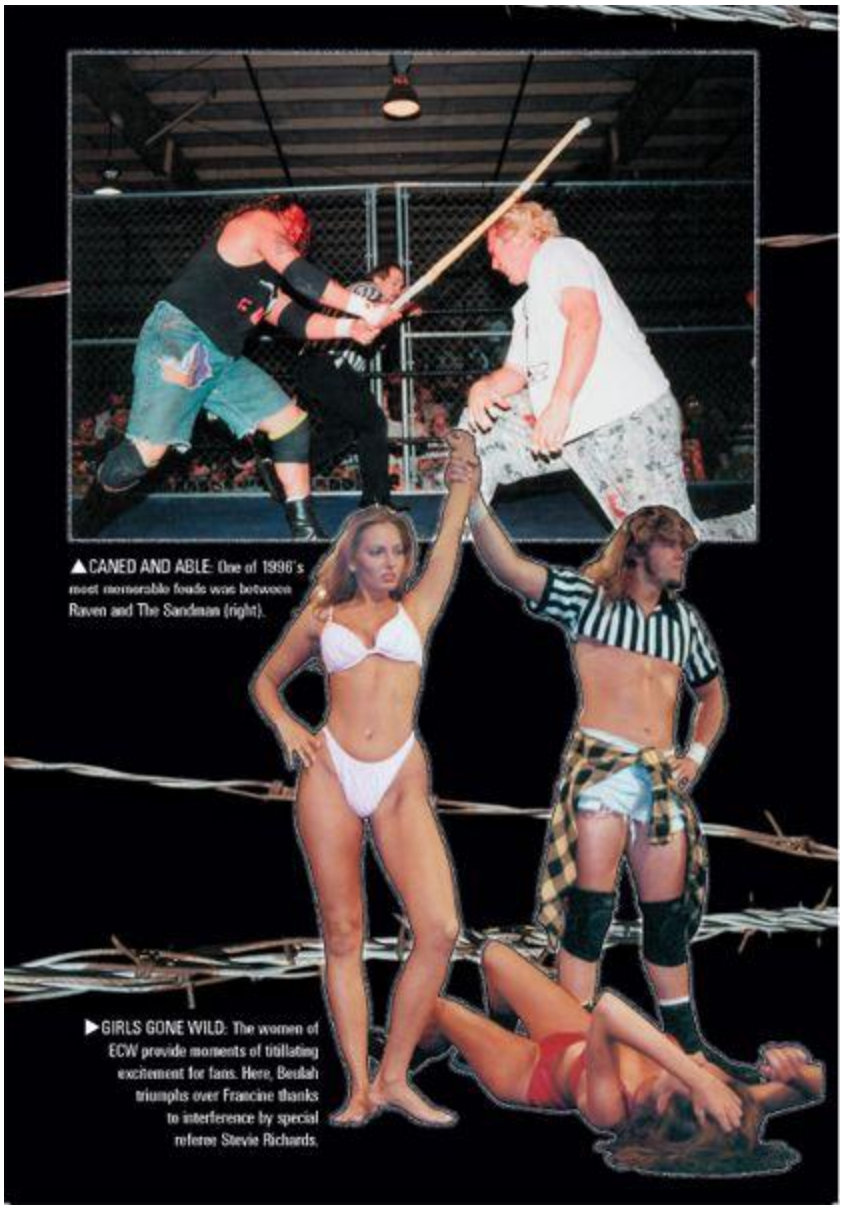
◀SHOOTING FROM THE HIP: Brian Pillman obliterated the line between reality and wrestling fantasy.



▶WEAPONS OF CHOICE: Any object, whether brought by wrestler or fan, was fair game in ECW's bloody brawls.

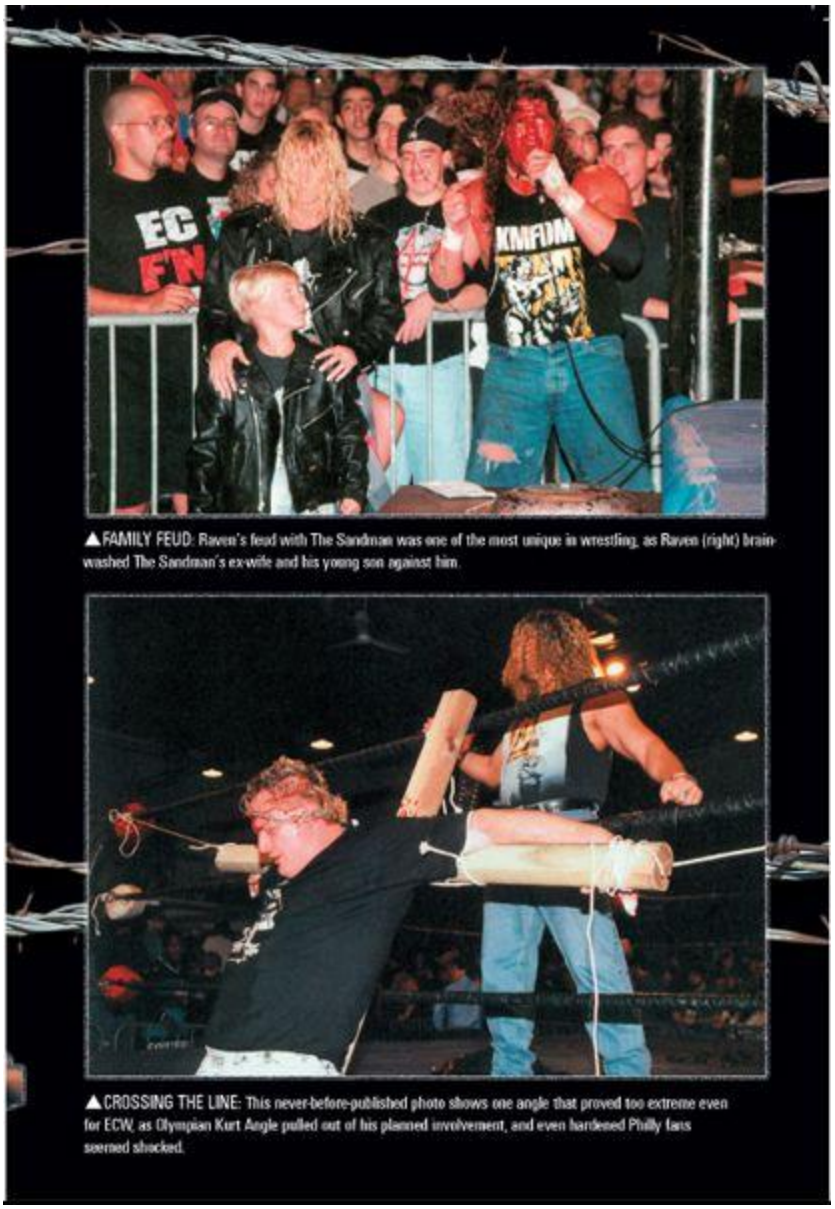
◀ALL WIRED UP: Mick "Cactus Jack" Foley exemplied the ECW philosophy of putting fan excitement ahead of personal well-being.

▲FIRST STRIKE: A chain match culminated the 1993 feud between Eddie Gilbert and Terry Funk, one of ECW's first major in-ring rivalries.



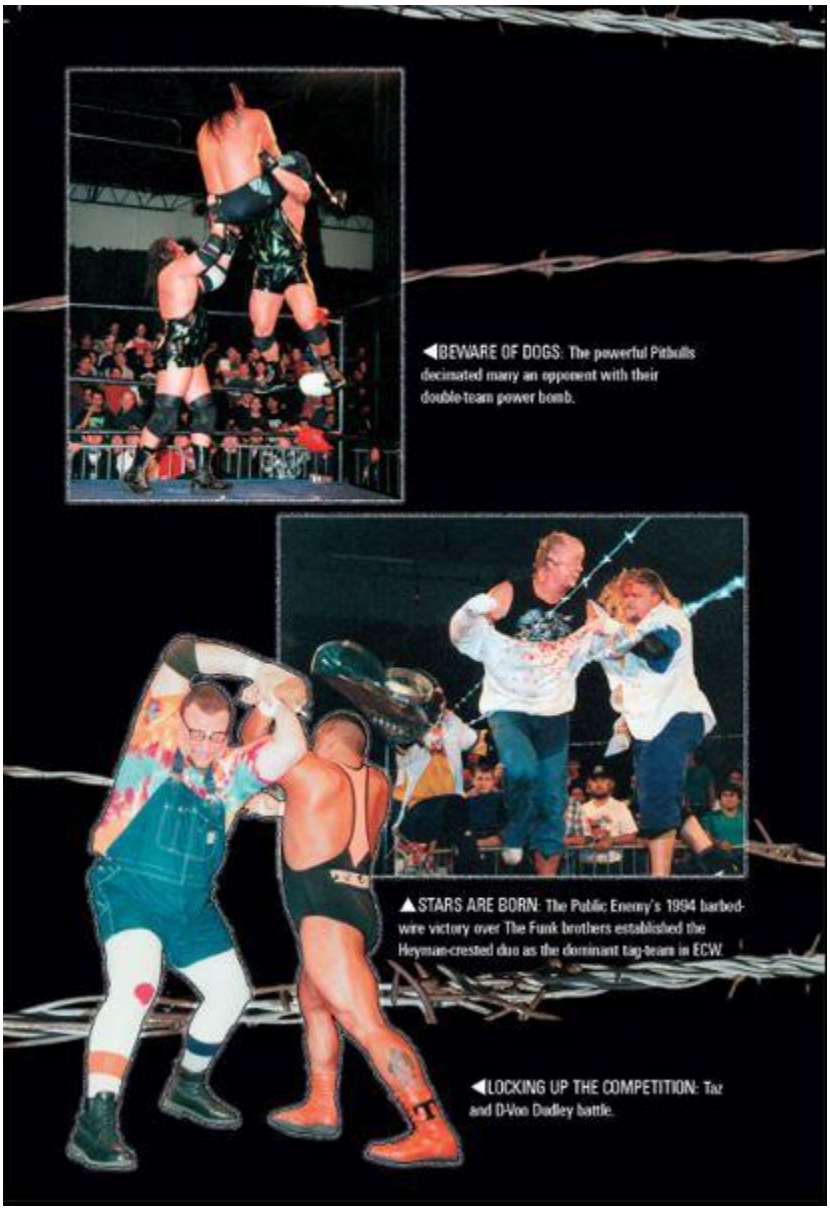
▲ CANED AND ABLE: One of 1996's most memorable feuds was between Raven and The Sandman (right).

▶ GIRLS GONE WILD: The women of ECW provide moments of titillating excitement for fans. Here, Beulah triumphs over Francine thanks to interference by special referee Stevie Richards.



▲ FAMILY FEUD: Raven's feud with The Sandman was one of the most unique in wrestling, as Raven (right) brainwashed The Sandman's ex-wife and his young son against him.

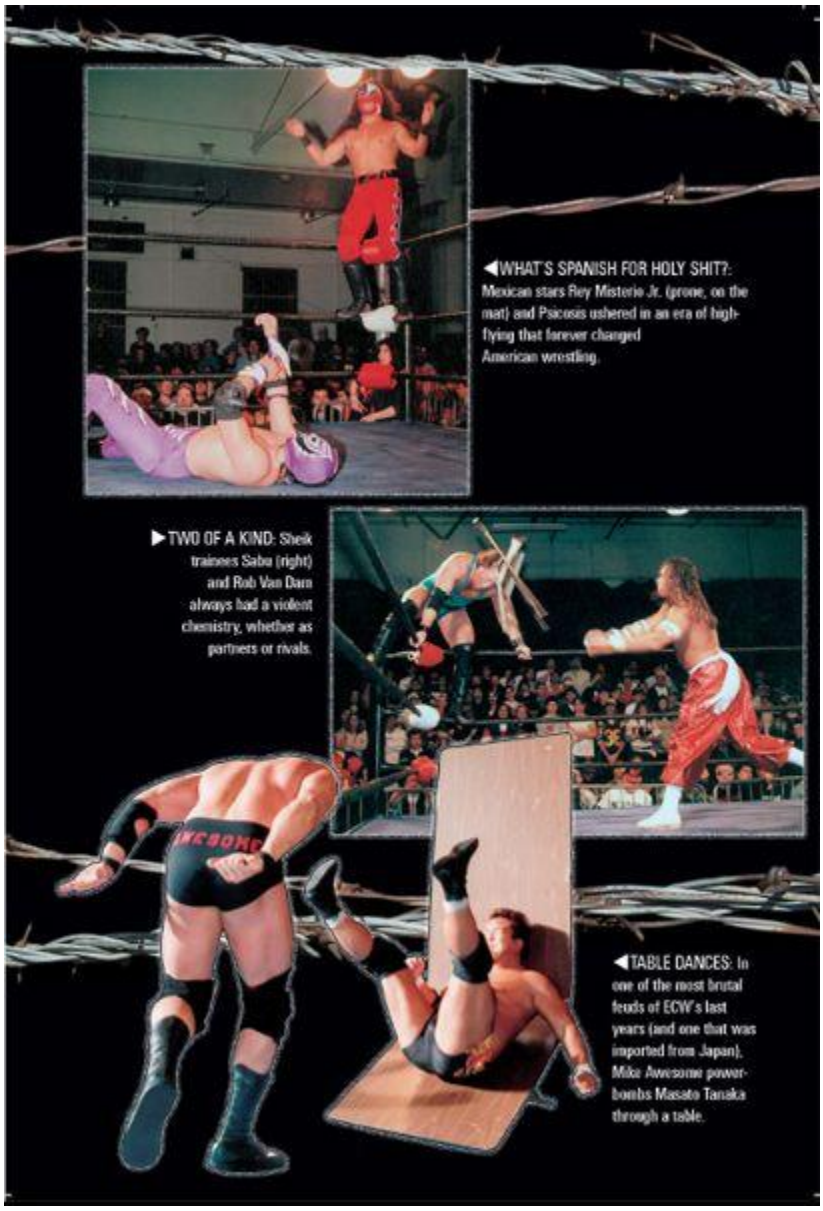
▲ CROSSING THE LINE: This never-before-published photo shows one angle that proved too extreme even for ECW, as Olympian Kurt Angle pulled out of his planned involvement, and even hardened Philly fans seemed shocked.



◀BEWARE OF DOGS: The powerful Pitbulls decimated many an opponent with their double-team power bomb.

▲STARS ARE BORN: The Public Enemy's 1994 barbed-wire victory over The Funk brothers established the Heyman-crested duo as the dominant tag-team in ECW.

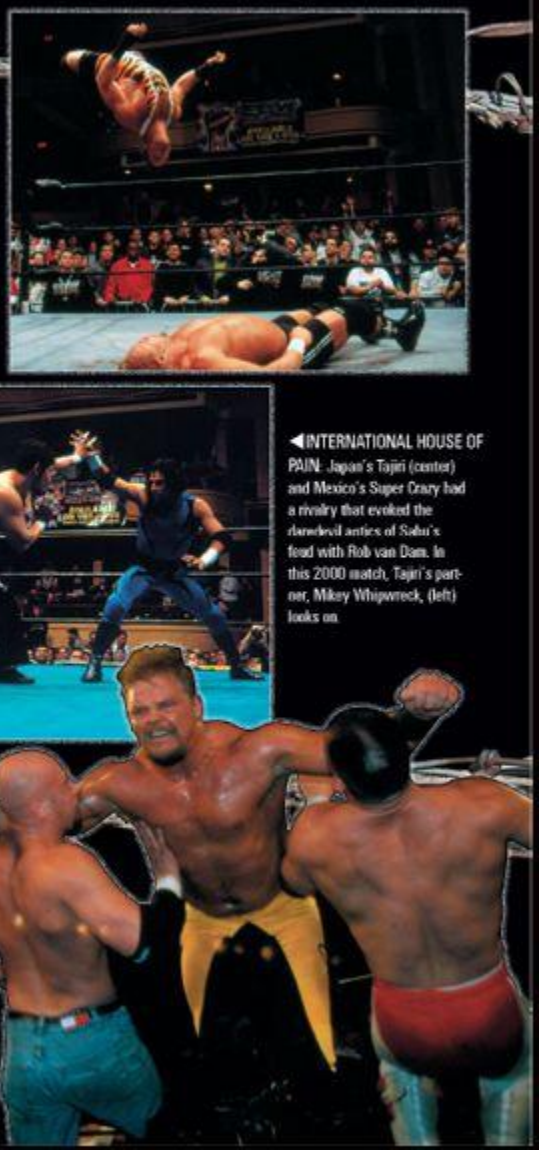
◀LOCKING UP THE COMPETITION: Taz and D-Von Dudley battle.



◀WHAT'S SPANISH FOR HOLY SHIT?: Mexican stars Rey Misterio Jr. (prone, on the mat) and Psicosis ushered in an era of high-flying that forever changed American wrestling.

▶TWO OF A KIND: Sheik trainees Sabu (right) and Rob Van Dam always had a violent chemistry, whether as partners or rivals.

◀TABLE DANCES: In one of the most brutal feuds of ECW's last years (and one that was imported from Japan), Mike Awesome power-bombs Masato Tanaka through a table.



▶DEMENTED INVENTOR: Rob Van Dam perfected many flying moves and invented others himself, such as the split-legged moonsault, in which he would spring his legs off the top ropes for the momentum to backflip onto his foes.

◀INTERNATIONAL HOUSE OF PAIN: Japan's Tajiri (center) and Mexico's Super Crazy had a rivalry that evoked the daredevil antics of Sabu's feud with Rob van Dam. In this 2000 match, Tajiri's partner, Mikey Whipwreck, (left) looks on.

▶MAKING AN IMPACT: It took the Impact Players, Justin Credible (left) and Lance Storm, to turn The Franchise (shown here clotheslining both men) into a full-edged hero.

CHAPTER 9

BRIAN PILLMAN

“Eric Bischoff is a fucking shithead. You wana know what Eric Bischoff is? Eric Bischoff is like each and every one of you, a small fucking mark!”

–BRIAN PILLMAN IO ECW FANS

SO WHY A WHOLE CHAPTER on a guy who only appeared in ECW for a couple of months in 1995 and 1996 and who never had a single match during that time? Read on.

Kim Wood was a longtime strength coach with the Cincinnati Bengals, the team Pillman played for briefly in the 1980s. Wood and Pillman became close friends, and they plotted what would be nearly one of the most masterful works in wrestling history.

In 1995, Pillman was coming to the end of his WCW contract, and WCW boss Eric Bischoff’s plan appeared to be to keep Pillman inactive, to drive down his value when it came time to negotiate a new deal.

“A lot of wrestlers play like they’re tough, but that’s manipulated,” Wood said. “Pillman really was a tough guy, not big, but totally fearless, and he was a real athlete, which few of them were. But he was also an intelligent man, and he wanted to get the physical stuff out of his system. He was the kind of man who never would have been a teacher or an insurance salesman.”

HARDCORE WITH THE HARTS

Pillman, who trained to wrestle under the famous Hart family in Calgary, had something else that made him suited for the wrestling business.

“Brian had those carny tendencies,” Wood said. “To a lot of wrestlers, everything’s a *work*. The term *con man* is probably too strong, because that implies criminality, but most wrestlers were tricksters at every level. Their connection to reality was interesting to say the least, and Pillman fell right into that world.”

The need to work other people extended to fellow wrestlers often in brutal fashion. Stampede, the Canadian promotion owned by the Harts, was known as a place of intense *ribs* (practical jokes wrestlers play, usually on each other). Once, in the late 1980s, a wrestler who had washed out of the WWF and had come to Stampede was at a bar. He was drinking with a group of his fellows when he got up to go to the bathroom. When he got up to go to the bathroom, another wrestler spiked his drink with a drug that knocked him out.

The wrestler woke up to find himself naked and lying outside in the snow. His body hair had been shaven, his body spray-painted, and his hands glued to his face.

The Stampede wrestlers learned firsthand how tough Pillman was after arranging an encounter between him and a huge bodybuilder in a locker room.

“The idea was that Pillman would go into the locker room and get the fuck beaten out of him by this bodybuilder,” Wood said. “There were about 50 people waiting outside for the bodybuilder to come out. Instead, Pillman comes out. Turned out he had beaten the hell out of the guy and plucked out one of his eyeballs. After that, they were all afraid of him.”

THE UPS AND DOWN OF WCW

By early 1989, Pillman was in WCW, where he met “Nature Boy” Rie Flair.

“I got this call in the middle of the night when he first got there,” Wood said. “He said, I’m totally fucked! I cant handle this!’”

It wasn’t that Pillman made a bad impression. Far from it—he had befriended the company’s top dog. Unfortunately, the top dog more than lived up to the party animal persona he displayed.

“Rie Flair likes me,” Pillman told Wood, “and now, I gotta go out with him every night! The wrestling is a piece of cake, but two-thirds of the drinks he orders, I pour into potted plants, and I still get too fucked up to move! And then, he’s in the rental car at 7 a.m., ready to go!”

For the next six years, Pillman had ups and downs in WCW, working with a number of partners and opponents.

“Flair liked him, but Ole Anderson and Bill Watts didn’t,” said Wood, referring to two longtime wrestlers who each had a turn running WCW in the early 1990s. “They teamed him with Tom Zenk, and he got to the point that he couldn’t stand Zenk, but he always got along with Steve Austin, his Hollywood Blondes partner, but they ended up killing The Blondes because it became too popular.”

Pillman remained a popular figure with his fellow wrestlers despite his peaks and valleys with management.

“Pillman was the guy the other guys all wanted to be,” Wood said. “They had this thing for him, because he was the real deal. He got all the women; the man was legendary. You know those *Penthouse* letters that run every month, how they all seem like they’re all fiction and all written by the same person? Well, we realized we were half-correct—they *were* all written by the same person. That person was Brian Pillman, and all those stories were true. He’d show up to team functions with black women, just to make the other players envious.”

GETTING NOTICED

By 1995, Pillman’s WCW contract was up, and Bischoff was not looking to keep paying him as well as the deal Pillman had put together with K. Allan “Kip” Frey, WCW’s head in 1992. Pillman was looking for ways to get the kind of attention that would make him more marketable and, thus, more valuable.

One of those ideas was to run onto the football field and chain himself to a goalpost at the 1996 Super Bowl, interrupting one of the most watched events on television. Wood said that when Pillman asked him to use his

NFL connections to get him a ticket to the big game, Wood had to tell his friend no.

"I wasn't going to get involved with that," he said. "They can trace those tickets. But it was a good idea if he wanted to get famous."

Pillman also came up with an idea to pit WCW and the WWF against each other with ECW playing a key role in the charade.

"You have to realize the guys who inspired Pillman were Bruiser Brody and The Road Warriors," Wood said. "Hawk would go into character in the locker room and Joe ['Road Warrior Animal' Laurinitus] would hit him and say, 'Save it.' Brody was always in character, and because of that, he always got his way. Part of Hawk's thing was you should be in character, because if people are afraid of you, you'd usually get your way."

Pillman's personal angle started at the 1995 National Association of Television Producers and Executives convention, an annual event at which TV producers try to sell their shows to syndicated stations. Because of cable and satellite television's proliferation, the convention is no longer the huge event it once was, but in 1995 major stars appeared to promote their shows. Representing the WWF at its booth was owner Vincent Kennedy McMahon himself. One person at the convention was particularly looking forward to meeting him.

"One of Brians scams was to carry a camera everywhere," Wood said. "He's at the convention with WCW, and there's Vince. Pillman goes right up to Vince, catches him by surprise, and gets someone to take a picture of the two of them. So now Pillman has this picture of Vince McMahon, smiling, with his arm around Pillman."

Brian Pillman held onto the photo, while WCW started booking him to lose every week.

"He wanted to do something strong with his contract coming up in two to three months," Wood said. "But they were doing the deal on him where he was losing everything. Pillman knew, in sports, you always wanted to end your tenure on an upswing."

Wood told Pillman it was time to use his skills to work the people who had the most control over his fortune—WCW executives.

"The trick is he would be working Bischoff, while making him think he was the one working others, just to see if he was dumb enough to fall for it," Wood said.

“Brian had come to the conclusion that most wrestlers were mentally ill,” Wood said. “They go until there’s nothing left of them. They get so manipulated that the only thing they become is the character they’re told to play. And Pillman was dealing with Bischoff, who was a complete mark.”

Step one was to create a situation with Kevin Sullivan that would look as though it were a genuine conflict even to the cynics who made up the world of pro wrestling.

“I told him, ‘You go and talk to Bischoff,’” Wood said. “Bischoff was always trying to convince people he was a tough guy. He was into martial arts and all that shit. The guy was a complete mark for himself, which told Pillman he could definitely be worked. Bischoff thought that the work was that Pillman and Sullivan would be tricking people into thinking they were really fighting. It appealed to Bischoff, because it was a deal where he would look good, like he was the man who could swing things. The only thing was to make it convincing, he would have to get Pillman to where he was no longer under a contract.”

Wrestlers were easy marks for this particular work, Wood said, because many of them were not as adept at actual fighting as they liked people to think.

“Most pro wrestlers were just terrible fighters,” Wood said. “In fights, they try to use pro wrestling moves, which don’t work. So Kevin and Brian have a little fight, and the wrestlers think it’s real, because Kevin tries to go for Brian’s *eyes*. The idea was if he could build something as real, he could build a work where only he would know what the work was.”

Pillman ended up “getting into trouble” over the “fight” with booker Sullivan, as Eric Bischoff “suspended” Pillman. Pillman “proved” how out of control he was by showing up at the arena shows anyway, coming out of the crowd and having to be restrained by security. Pillmans next step, as he convinced Bischoff that they should work even the wrestlers into believing they were seeing a real problem, was to obtain a release notice from Bischoff.

“And then, in the middle of this scam, he faxes *[Pro Wrestling Torch* newsletter publisher] Wade Keller the picture of him and Vince, smiling and shaking hands,” Wood said.

Wrestling has long been a hotbed of rumors, and there was no shortage of them about Brian Pillman.

“All of the sudden, it’s the hottest thing in wrestling, because people think it’s a shoot,” Wood said.

Midway through the plan, Pillman started getting nervous, fearing that if something went wrong, no one would want him, and his power play would end with him unemployed.

Wood said, “I told him, ‘Brian, if this goes to court, they’re still paying you, and you’ve been fired!’”

More and more people around the situation believed Pillmans feud with WCW management was legitimate, and the people involved did everything they could to keep it that way. Bischoff showed Pillmans letter of termination to everyone he could, Pillman kept going to WCW house shows and “trying” to attack other wrestlers from the crowd, as if he were going for legitimate revenge.

However, the newsletters were not fooled. Dave Meltzer’s the *Wrestling Observer* reported the entire Pillman scenario as a work, almost from the beginning, as did Wade Keller’s *Pro Wrestling Torch*.

“When they had their faceoff in the ring, Kevin went for Brian’s eye, and the announcers did not call it, and that made me think, ‘This could be a shoot,’” Meltzer said. “But then Kevin Sullivan mentioned it in a promo, which totally exposed the whole thing as an angle. I called Brian and said, ‘Brian, they blew your angle.’ He said, ‘Can’t you just pretend?’ I said no, first because I can’t pretend, but also because they had already blown it when Kevin did a wrestling promo about it.”

Wood told Pillman to calm down, that the plan was working. He just had one thing to tell Pillman—“Brian, we have to get you on TV.”

Pillman took his problem to Bischoff, couching it in terms that would lead Bischoff to do what Pillman needed him to do. Pillman told Bischoff that to keep things going and continue convincing people the situation was a shoot, Pillman needed to appear on someone else’s television show.

And so it was that Bischoff called Heyman and reached an agreement to pay ECW in order to allow Pillman onto ECW television.

“Heyman was just trying to keep money coming in from any source he could,” Wood said. “I also told Brian to go to auditions for Hollywood. Somewhere, there’s a little video of Pillman wrestling with a pencil, that’s one of the funniest things you’ll ever see.”

THE ECW PHASE

One night, weeks after his last appearance on WCW television, Pillman showed up in the crowd of another company—ECW.

He sat on the front row next to a woman holding a baby. He shouted down some of ECW's favorites, and when Shane Douglas got into his face, Pillman held the baby between them.

By this point, the hardcore wrestling fans knew Pillman had reached some kind of agreement with ECW even though Joey Styles did a pretty convincing job of portraying him as an outsider. Still, Pillman had taken his unpredictability to such heights that hardly anyone knew what was real and what was not.

"Even Eric Bischoff and Kevin Sullivan, they knew, but they didn't know," Wood said. "Dallas Page [a WCW wrestler whose push was partly based on him being a friend and neighbor of Bischoff] says he knew all about it, but he's full of shit. The only people who knew what was really going on were me and Brian. One night, he was even locked out of the ECW Arena in his wrestling suit, freezing his ass off because it's 10 degrees outside, and security won't let him in, because they think he's some fan."

Pillman, like ECW itself, was on the cutting edge of technology, using online avenues to take his *work* directly to the fans.

"He really was one of the very first wrestlers who really got into the Internet," Wood said. "Somehow, he actually continued his chat room for many months after he died, talking to people. When he was alive, though, he used to stay up all night on his computer."

Pillman also used his status as a former Bengal to give his personal angle a voice at least in Cincinnati.

"He'd do radio stuff constantly, and he was a great interview," Wood said. "If he'd wanted, he could have ended up with his own show."

A Pillman interview on ECW in February 1996 saw him refer to Heyman as "Booker Man," (the same term he'd used for Sullivan).

Douglas acted stunned and said, "He's shooting!"

Pillman and Douglas faced off again at the March 8, 1996, *Big Ass Extreme Bash*, with Pillman ripping on Douglas for the way he left the WWF and Dean Douglas behind.

“A real man doesn’t quit,” Pillman told Douglas. “A real man gets fired!”

(As an aside, in another example of ECW itself bringing some reality onto its shows, the *Big Ass Extreme Bash* was dedicated to Eugene Moore, accused of being a Dennis Coraluzzo flunky who reported safety violations tied to the sizes of ECW Arena crowds. Heyman promptly got a fire-code variance, allowing ECW to pack more fans into the building. On television, Styles thanked Moore for “making it all possible” and said dedicating the show to Moore was only appropriate, since the 300-pound Moore knew something about “Big Ass.” Moore threatened to sue, but never did.)

By the end of his ECW appearances, Pillman was “buying commercial time” to plug his “900” telephone line.

Callers to that line found themselves on the receiving end of a previously recorded insult-laden promo by Pillman. The hotline tapered off soon enough, because people quickly burned out on being insulted, but it did about $10,000 a week for the first couple of weeks.

“Brian was a free agent, but he wasn’t a free agent,” Wood said. “His contract was up by now, and the scam was still on. Eric had to say he fired him, to keep working’ people. Bischoff was the perfect patsy, because his attitude was it really was his idea all along, because Brian had made him think it was. The wrestling business was holding its breath, because no one knew what Pillman was doing. The point is he swerved *everybody*. If he hadn’t nearly killed himself, he’d have made out like a bandit.”

THE END OF THE WORK

Pillman had recently purchased a Humvee, and on April 15, 1996, he wrecked it. Pillman flew through the roof of the vehicle, shattering his ankle in the process. Doctors rebuilt the ankle, but the accident should have marked the end of Pillman’s wrestling career. But Pillman had not signed the lucrative deal toward which his scheme had been building, and he was not about to stop when he was so close to his goal.

Pillman lay in a hospital burn unit with his head swollen to the size of a beach ball, his face fractured, and his ankle shattered. Wood came to visit.

Wood's words of consolation?

"You little shit! You had it *made?*

Amazingly, Pillman's antics over the previous months had made him such a hot commodity that even a crippled Pillman was seen as an asset, and WWF owner Vince McMahon ended up swiping Pillman from WCW. Bischoff and company could do nothing about it, because as part of the work, Pillman had gotten a release that, legally speaking, was very real.

"Vince still signed him, even in the condition he was in, for pretty good money," Wood said.

The only thing left to resolve was Pillman's status with ECW.

"In the midst of this whole thing, Pillman had signed a contract with Heyman, but Heyman was playing in a funny area, because he had been taking money from both WCW and the WWF, the people on the two sides who were basically trying to destroy him," Wood said.

Even after signing his WWF contract, Pillman made a handful of appearances on ECW television. Although Pillman never actually worked a match there, Heyman tried to use him to give ECW talent a *rub*, or clout. In one of his final appearances, he nailed Mikey Whipwreck with a crutch and endorsed burgeoning heel Rob Van Dam.

In a weird way, Brian Pillman embodied what Heyman had always wanted ECW to be—a successful blend of work and shoot that worked even the people who thought they knew everything.

"Pillman created this whole thing, and it was brilliant, if I do say so myself," Wood said. "The whole thing was to increase Brians attractiveness, so he would get money from one of those fuckers. The brilliant part was he brought in Bischoff as a confederate and made Bischoff think it was his idea. Then he went independent but with Bischoff's blessing, and he went to ECW, but he pitted them all against each other. He knew if Vince can see you're hot, he'll want you."

Wood said that the greatest angle in wrestling worked because even the people who thought they were in on it ultimately found themselves among the marks.

"People are fascinated by the backstage stuff in wrestling, because the wrestlers' lives are far more bizarre than what goes on in the ring. Take Vince McMahon—you couldn't make him up."

A SAD CONCLUSION

Pillman's leg would not heal properly, and so doctors had to keep rebreaking it. He ultimately left the hospital with a WWF contract, a fused ankle, and an addiction to painkillers.

"The last time my son and I saw him was at a public appearance at a comic store," Wood said. "He was just gone. He'd been taking Mexican Quaaludes and somas. Everyone I talked to about him said he would be dead in two weeks, and in two weeks he was dead."

All of Brian Pillmans works and shoots came to an end on October 5, 1997, the day he was scheduled to be a key part of a WWF pay-per-view. Pillman was found dead in a hotel room in Minneapolis. His cause of death was eventually listed as a heart attack, and medical examiners found an enlarged heart in his body, a finding that reflects the usage of growth-hormone drugs.

But the impact of Pillmans scheme was felt for years after his death, because his success at hitting the worked shoot bulls-eye was not lost on wrestlings power players, often much to the detriment of the wrestling industry.

Pillman succeeding in blurring the line between what was and was not real in wrestling to his own benefit to a degree Paul Heyman only dreamed of.

"You know, for about a three-week period, it was the hottest thing in wrestling, and it worked out exactly as he had planned it," Wood said. "And he changed wrestling after that. In a way, it was partially responsible for the death of WCW with everybody trying to work everybody else. But the beauty of what Brian did was lost on [former WWF and WCW writer Vince] Russo, who would try to throw things out there to make you think it was real to where no one believed anything."

CHAPTER 10

A MATTER OF RESPECT

“Everybody known Taz is undefeated He’s gonna drop this kid on his head and stretch him out, baby!”

–BILL ALPHONSO ON ECW TELEVISION IN 1996

AMIDST ALL THE TURMOIL of early 1996 was one positive note. One of Heyman’s most successful projects to date was Taz. Heyman took the short, stocky man who had started out as a wildman and transformed him into a shoot fighter. It started with Taz giving expert commentary on the ECW TV program, but only picked up steam when he returned to the ring from a neck injury.

The idea was to sell Taz as the toughest of the tough, a legitimate fighting machine. To that end, Heyman fed him opponent after opponent, sacrificing them to make Taz seem invincible. Heyman had already earned Tazs trust by continuing to pay him through the entire time he was out with a neck injury.

At a February 1996 show in Queens, New York, Taz called out the monstrous 911. Behind the scenes, Heyman and 911 had a falling out over 911s handling of the ring crew, so he was gone. ECW buried him when Gordon came to the ring and told Taz that 911 was afraid of him. 911 ended up coming back, but he didn’t stay long and soon was gone for good.

Taz was also building a rivalry with former tag partner Sabu. When Rob Van Dam capitalized on Sabu’s neck injury to beat him in a match, Heyman sold that Taz was the one who tipped Van Dam off about the neck.

Behind the scenes, Peter “Taz” Serneca was becoming more active in the direction of the company. Most people would not have imagined Taz as an artist in any medium besides violence, but he also designed ECW’s T-shirts, and when Heyman started planning to open an ECW wrestling school in 1996, Taz was the only choice to serve as head instructor.

One of the first graduates ended up being Taz’s cousin, Chris Ghetti.

After his September 1996 debut, Ghetti got into the mix pretty quickly, but did not appear to be over his head at any point. Part of that was his talent, but part was Heyman's booking.

"I wrestled Ghetti in one of his first matches when I was the world champion," Shane Douglas said. "People were just expecting me to squash him, but he started out strong, and 30 seconds into the match, the fans forgot the world champ-rookie dynamic and got into the match. The thing about ECW was on any given night anyone could beat anyone."

TOUGH TANDEMS

Heyman was building more than just Taz, though. Whether it was The Public Enemy, Chris Benoit and Dean Malenko, or The Pitbulls, ECW had always placed emphasis on tag teams. By 1996, a new team was on the rise. They were Perry Satullo and George Caiazo, but to ECW fans, they were Perry Saturn and John Kronus, The Eliminators. The Eliminators were Killer Kowalski trainees who had been toiling in the Memphis circuit when they put a tape together and sent it to Heyman, who liked what he saw.

As The Eliminators picked up steam in ECW, Styles referred to them more and more as "the greatest tag team in the world," and they looked like they might well be. In truth, they were a good team, but they were also the beneficiaries of Heyman's ability to emphasize wrestlers' strengths, while masking their weaknesses. In The Eliminators' case, any technical deficiencies were masked by their heavy reliance on spectacular double-team moves.

The Eliminators joining ECW opened the door to another man coming in, one who would help ECW to some of the most successful events the company ever ran. His name was Paul Richard.

"Perry [Saturn] and I were roommates, so when Paul decided he was interested in using them, I went to the TV taping with them," Richard said.

Richard saw some familiar faces backstage, most notably Tommy Dreamer and Taz, both of whom Richard had known when all three worked a few years prior for the Savoldi family's International Championship Wrestling promotion, a New England-based promotion. Coincidentally,

ICW was also where Heyman really cut his teeth as a head booker with such characters as The Wrestling School Dropout.

“I talked to Paul, and he said if I wanted a spot in ECW, I got it,” Richard said.

Soon, Richard became the official New England promoter for Extreme Championship Wrestling.

NEW ENGLAND MEETS ECW

Richard immediately began working to get ECW on television in the Boston area.

“The violence had kept ECW off the air in a lot of cities,” he said. “Between that, the language, and the chairs, TV stations were very hesitant about putting ECW on.”

Richard took a chance on an unlikely station—the Spanish language Univision affiliate.

“Univision was interested in having ECW on in a late-night slot on Fridays or Saturdays, and they were selling their time really cheap.”

Richard figured the audience for the show would be ECW’s target adult demographic, because viewers would be catching the program when coming home from a night out.

Richard said ECW was a hit from the first New England dates he promoted.

“Salisbury, Massachusetts, had Champs Arena,” he said. “We got the building from the guy with only 10 days to promote the show in a town where no one had heard of ECW before. We drew 350, which was just shocking. I mean the WWF might not think that’s a big number, but for what we were doing, it was just unbelievable.”

Richard said the strength of the Spanish network where ECW’s television show aired and the promos produced by Ron Buffone and Charlie Bruzesse were integral to the success of his ECW events.

“And it was so important that Charlie and Ron did those promos, because if I’d waited for Paul E., they never would get done,” he said. “The TV was what did it for us, because everybody in the area had that channel,

Channel 27. I once asked Paul why he wanted to be on a sports channel, because you would have to have cable and then buy the sports package to get it, and it wasn't a big thing, but that Spanish channel went all over, and everyone got it. Paul E. could never get his act together to get ECW on another 15 stations, because he was too busy trying to do everything else."

The New England promoters also arranged radio interviews for ECW wrestlers, as well as personal appearances.

"We'd have The Sandman pulling into a parking lot for an appearance in a Hummer with his music playing," Richard said. "We had a signing in a mall with Shane [Douglas], and 1,000 people turned up. I had 15 years worth of connections in the area, and I used them all. I'd see Paul Heyman at the shows and give him bags of articles about ECW. We really did help build it from what it was to what it was about to be."

WELCOME TO THE FAMILY

Wrestlers forged a tighter unit with an almost familial sense, even among guys who could not stand each other. Stu Kaplan said the politics that were rampant in bigger companies were not as pronounced in ECW.

"Being backstage at a WWT show was completely different than backstage at an ECW show," he said. "It was the difference between a Hollywood production and a local event. And they weren't doing shows at these huge arenas. The ECW guys were almost forced to be together, because there was one dressing room instead of 15.1 don't want to say it was like you were forced into the fraternity, but you had to say hi to your neighbor, whereas in the WWT if you didn't want to see someone, you had plenty of dressing rooms to choose from."

That familial atmosphere was something that continued in ECW throughout its days. When preliminary wrestler Danny Doring received word that his mother had passed away while backstage at the January 16, 1999, ECW Arena show, the wrestlers took up a collection to help Doring with funeral expenses. Three of the company's stars each pitched in $1,000.

ECW was well on its way to replacing the small legion of recent departures with a new class of Heyman projects. Despite playing the snotty

heel role to near perfection, Rob Van Dam was starting to get respectful ovations from fans who appreciated his dazzling dives even as his rivalry with fellow daredevil and Sheik trainee Sabu intensified.

Van Dam's issue with Sabu built to May 11, 1996, in the ECW Arena, a show called *A Matter of Respect*. Van Dam upset Sabu, which meant, under the terms of the match, that Sabu was to shake his hand and say he respected Van Dam. Van Dam blew off the handshake and made clear he did not respect Sabu, cementing his status as a cocky villain.

About three weeks later, a program began that would help cement Taz's status as the supreme shoot-fighting machine. The Ultimate Fighting Championship started in 1993, as a form of real combat between practitioners of different fighting styles. Over the next few years, it evolved into a more organized sport with weight classes, but the object was always the same—to show the toughest fighters in the world.

Paul "Polar Bear" Varelans was a middle-of-the-pack UFC fighter, but at 6-foot-8 and 340 pounds, he was a menacing athlete with a fighter's pedigree. And he was about to be in Paul Heyman's crosshairs.

Heyman negotiated with Varelans for the Polar Bear to wrestle Taz in the ECW Arena. They went about setting the stage at the June 1, 1996, show, when Taz demanded competition after beating a hapless Jason Helton. Announcer Joey Styles told him there was someone ready to fight him, and Taz got excited, thinking Joey was referring to Sabu. (Heyman was doing the slow build for a big match between the two.) Instead, Styles pointed to the front row, where Varelans stood up. The two ended up being pulled apart, with Taz taunting Varelans with quips like "UFC sucks!" while Paul Varelans called Taz "Little Boy."

Varelans was not the only "celebrity" on that night's show. The other was a woman who exemplified the difference between ECW and the two major companies—prostitute Divine Brown. Only Heyman would have brought in the woman most famous for getting arrested with movie star Hugh Grant, when police caught her performing oral sex on him in a rented BMW. Divine's role on this show was to be Stevie Richards' offering to Raven, who had been looking for the scummiest, smuttiest woman he could find as a reaction to Beulah leaving him for Tommy Dreamer. For the record, Ravens reaction to Brown was, "Richards, she hasn't been with enough people yet. I don't want her."

In another wrestling moment not likely to be repeated on *Smackdown!* anytime soon, Heyman also promised Divine Brown blowjobs for everyone in the crowd if the show disappointed. Naturally, when one of the night's main events dragged, fans started chanting, "Where's our blowjobs?"

Ravens quest would end with him settling on Lori Fullington, The Sandman's ex-wife, as part of the aforementioned Tyler Fullington angle.

Taz and Varelans had their battle at June 22's *Hardcore Heaven 1996*, and fans today still argue over whether it was a work or a shoot. It turned out to be one of ECW's weirdest blends of work and shoot to date.

The original plan was for Varelans to take a dive for Taz to further establish Taz as a legitimate tough guy. Whether Heyman told Varelans that is a matter of conjecture, although many people close to Heyman believe that he played upon Varelans' desire to be a pro wrestler in order to get him to go along with the plan. Heyman later said Varelans knew the plan right from the start. Varelans insisted Heyman did not tell him that, comparing dealing with ECW to playing a "shell game." Whatever happened, two things are clear. First, Varelans ultimately agreed to job the match to Taz. Second, Heyman wasn't sure he believed the UFC fighter would live up to that agreement.

The in-ring spectacle started with a tirade from Bill Alphonso, by nowTaz's manager. Fans chanted "Shut the fuck up!" as Styles described "the fans politely asking Alphonso to return the microphone to ringside." Taz and Varelans grappled for a few seconds, with neither man particularly outshining the other. It appeared as willing as Varelans was initially, he was getting antsy about whether he should actually do the job for Taz. At one point during the match, Missy Hyatt (The Sandman's manager and wrestling's legendary sexual dynamo) even offered to have sex with Varelans if he would lose, although she never followed up on the offer. Then, as Varelans stood up, Perry Saturn mounted the top rope and delivered as hard a dropkick as you're likely to see. Taz hooked the *katahajime* (or "Tazmission" choke hold) on a groggy Varelans for the win.

Then after winning what was at least partly a shoot, Taz (who had been getting some support from audience members who saw him as defending ECW against the UFC) mocked the fans, telling them how he screwed them over by having them think they were going to see a shoot.

Many in the locker room were nervous that Varelans would try to shoot with Taz, while Varelans was telling people backstage that he never

had any other plan.

"Varelans had no clue," said Paul Richard, whom Heyman had referee the match. "I think he thought it was real. He was telling people, I'm going to beat up Taz,' and Taz was telling people backstage, 'We're going to get in a fight.'"

Different parties debate who knew what about the match, but everyone seems to agree that Varelans did not know Perry Saturn would be coming off of the top rope to deliver one of the stiffest dropkicks in memory.

"Paul just told them ECW guys were coming to watch the match," Richard said. "Saturn damn near knocked Varelans' head off."

Taz locked in the Tazmission, which Varelans was in position to defend, and won the match by rendering the Polar Bear unconscious. Then, Richard rolled Varelans to the floor and laid on him, while Taz delivered his promo.

"We didn't want him getting right back up," Richard said. "But that wasn't a problem. He didn't know where he was or what was going on."

EXTREME AMBITION

With Taz and Sabu both victorious, Heyman was trying to make their match buildup a slow burn, something he could save for ECW's next big step—pay-per-view. Like Heyman, Taz was willing to mix real life with his wrestling storyline. Witness the October 19, 1996, show in Bensalem, where Taz shoved a rowdy fan, only to get on the house microphone and say he respected the fan, because at least he would stand up for himself in contrast to Sabu, whom Taz called "a pussy."

Taz's next faceoff would be with Kurt Angle. Angle was an Olympic gold medalist in freestyle wrestling in 1996, and Heyman was trying to bring him into ECW to be the next "legitimate" competitor to be fed to Taz. The October 26 ECW Arena show, aptly dubbed *High Incident*, featured Taz shaking Angles hand in the ring. In doing so, however, he noted that while Angle was a great amateur, "I'm a great professional."

Any chance of Angle doing business with ECW went out the window by the end of the night, when Raven crucified The Sandman, complete with

a crown of barbed wire. Angle freaked for reasons having to do with equal parts morality and image and threatened to sue Heyman if his name appeared in conjunction with the crucifixion. The Olympian Angle wanted nothing to do with the angle he had just witnessed.

And Angle was not the only one offended that night. The usually boisterous ECW audience appeared stunned into muttering near-silence.

“That was the only thing I thought was really tasteless,” fan John “Hat Guy” Bailey said. “I thought they really crossed the line with the crucifixion angle.”

Apparently realizing he might have finally gone too far or perhaps just trying to salvage a deal with Angle, Heyman sent Raven back to the ring to apologize. Scott Levy was appalled at having to do something so out of character for Raven. The guy who had been psychologically torturing The Sandman for months by brainwashing his own eight-year-old son against him and laughing about it was going to apologize for offending the fans?

Raven gave a short apology that was about as sincere as a congressional campaign speech. He would later say he was intentionally disingenuous in an effort to keep the Raven character the hated villain.

CHAPTER 11

GROWING PAINS

“You are witnessing the difference between wrestling and sports entertainment!”

–JOEY STYLES

IN JUNE 1996, ECW got a better TV timeslot in its home base of Philadelphia, airing on WGTW-TV Wednesdays at 10 p.m.

The development of the Dudleys into a top act also continued. The comedic clan got a lot less funny when new brother D-Von entered the picture. D-Von Dudley (Devon Hughes) was a mean, nasty individual who wanted to wrest control of the family from “Big” Dick.

People who knew him said that behind the scenes, Devon Hughes was one of the nicest, most perpetually pleasant wrestlers around. But on camera and in the ring, D-Von Dudley exuded malevolence.

But, like all performers, tempers occasionally flared.

“I was the timekeeper at a house show, and I rang the bell in an Eliminators-Dudleys match when I wasn’t supposed to,” Don Laible said. “Buh Buh got hot and threw a chair at me. I said, I’m out of here. I’ve been around wrestling since before this guy was born, and I don’t know what’s happening around here anymore.’”

After the match, Perry Saturn had a flare-up of his own.

“We were in the back, and I told Perry I was leaving,” Laible said. “He wanted to know why, and I said it was because Buh Buh was mad at me. Perry had a pretty short temper, and he said, ‘No, we’ll take care of this right now. *Buh Buh!* Get over here right now!’”

Buh Buh went to Saturn, who wanted to know one thing—why had he thrown a chair at Saturn’s friend?

“Buh Buh said, ‘Oh, man, you know I was just working,’ but I know a pulled shot, and this wasn’t working,” Laible said.

The following morning about 9 a.m. Laible had a phone call.

“It was Buh Buh, calling to apologize,” Laible said. “I knew Perry had made him do it, but that was how ECW was—always chaotic, always kind

of frightening."

And in ECW, anyone inside the ringside area was fair game. Over the course of nearly a decade, ringside photographer George Tahinos captured thousands of images, photographing every ECW Arena show but one and every pay-per-view.

No one has captured the action of ECW in stills as he has, with his pictures appearing in such magazines as *Powerslam, WOW, Rampage*, and the official *ECW Magazine* that launched in 1999, but he said it came with a physical price.

"Man, I've been put through a table by Perry Saturn, attacked by Terry Funk, gored by Rhino," he said. "Terry Funk attacked me once. I was in the corner, and he grabbed me, knocked me down, and yanked my shirt. Then, he looked at me and said, 'Sorry, brother.' He and Taz, they're both the nicest guys in the world, but until I got to know them, they scared the hell out of me."

Heyman eventually did succeed in turning the clan heel, with heel turns by "Big" Dick and Buh Buh Ray Dudley, whose stutter was replaced by foul-mouthed tirades aimed at baiting fans into hating the Dudleys. In the months-long process, the Dudleys went from comedy act to ECW's top tag team.

Axl Rotten watched the Dudley clan evolve.

"It was interesting, because I think I wrestled every Dudley there was," he said. "When D-Von came in, Paul pulled me aside and said he wanted me to teach him how to wrestle an ECW tag match. I was given D-Von as a project to work tag matches in the ECW style. And he definitely learned it."

A CHANGE OF VENUE?

One of D-Von's early confrontations with his "brothers" occurred at *Heat Wave 1996 on* July 13. That show drew an announced ECW Arena crowd of 1,500, a number that had gone from being a record to being a regular occurrence. Even holding sellouts in the building, ECW wasn't making money, because of the size of the payroll. To make the shows in its home market profitable, ECW would have had to find a bigger venue, but

Heyman and Gordon (whose power was waning by 1996, having sold his ECW ownership to Heyman) refused to hold shows in Philadelphia anywhere but the ECW Arena.

In his 1998 America Online chat with fans, Heyman wrote, “Despite the advice of lawyers, despite the advice of advisors, despite the advice of accountants, despite the advice of associates, I have absolutely, positively, NO desire to leave the ECW Arena. I will admit that we can draw far more people at a more centrally located venue in Philadelphia, make far more money, playing to a far larger audience. But the Arena is home to us, despite constant problems and despite constant interference against our running there. Until the ECW Arena pushes us into a corner to a point where we could no longer run there, I don’t ever see myself making the conscious decision to abandon the place that we call home.”

HEATING UP

Heat Wave 1996 was also a big one for Shane Douglas, who had once again ascended to the throne as ECW’s top heel. As if his fiery promos and cocky persona were not enough, Heyman added a new ingredient to The Franchise package—Francine.

Francine’s stint as manager of The Pitbulls ended at *Heat Wave 1996 in* a four-way match for Chris Jericho’s ECW TV title. Jericho was a Canadian who earned the grudging respect of ECW fans with his gutsy performances and versatility. His three challengers on this night were the three previous TV champs—Too Cold Scorpio, Shane Douglas, and Pitbull 2.

Anthony “Pitbull 2” Durante had been feuding with Douglas since Douglas had broken his Pitbull partner’s neck months earlier. That was not an injury angle—Gary “Pitbull 1” Wolfe legitimately suffered a broken neck in a match with Douglas. Wolfe harbored bitterness toward Douglas for a long time after the accident, but Heyman turned the injury into one of the most viscerally memorable moments in ECW history. He booked Wolfe, who had mostly recovered, to intervene in a match involving Durante and Douglas. Douglas grabbed the halo that had been holding Wolfe’s head and

neck in place and yanked it. Heat turned into real venom, because fans (who did not know how far along Wolfe's recovery was) were ready to do serious harm to Douglas.

In the midst of all this, Douglas had beaten Scorpio for the TV title, Pitbull 2 had beaten Douglas, and Jericho had beaten the massive Pitbull, and so the stage was set for an epic battle.

The first person to be pinned and eliminated was the WCW-bound Jericho, meaning fans were now guaranteed to see a title change. Scorpio was next, and so it came back down to Douglas versus Pitbull 2. Just as Pitbull 2 seemed to have the match wrapped up, Francine came into the ring and attacked him, and then stripped off her shorts to reveal panties bearing the word *Franchise*. Pitbull 1 followed her in, and The Pitbulls made Francine pay for her treachery by superbombing her off the middle rope through a table. But Douglas soon capitalized on Francine's distraction to reassume command of the match, gave his belly-to-belly suplex finisher to Pitbull 2, and reclaimed the title.

The other half of that match, Too Cold Scorpio and Chris Jericho, would face-off the following month in Jericho's final ECW match. The fans were kinder to Jericho than they were to many departing stars, although they did chant, "Bischoff sucks!" during the match. Fast-forward three years, and Jericho might well have joined them.

The Van Dam-Sabu feud came to a close. Sabu defeated his high-flying rival in a stretcher match (the loser must be carted out on a stretcher) after Van Dam missed a big dive, which Styles described as "one high-risk move too many." Sabu's win only built up the anticipation for the inevitable showdown with Taz, but the match with Van Dam became an anticipated affair all its own. As the two men began their match, the ring ropes broke, leading to an hour delay while crews worked to repair the ring. The headliners didn't reappear until 12:30 a.m.

To keep the largely male audience entertained or at least occupied, Heyman sent female valet Kristina Laum, a.k.a. Kimona Wanaleya (get it?), to the elevated crow's nest overlooking the arena from which Joey Styles did play-by-play. Kimona kept the crowds interest by performing an exotic dance, shimmying around poles and bumping and grinding as if she were still working in a gentlemen's club.

TOO EXTREME?

Van Dam's stretcher ride was a planned ending, but many others were not, as high-risk moves were starting to catch up with ECW wrestlers. Tommy Dreamer, now the hardcore "innovator of violence," hurt his ribs in a September 13, 1996, match in Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania, but didn't miss a beat. Dreamer wrestled the next night in the ECW Arena, but a few years later, he would be nursing a variety of nagging injuries.

That September 14 show was a particularly painful one for more than just Dreamer. British wrestler Johnny Smith banged up his knee in a preliminary match, Doug Furnas broke his nose in another, and Douglas collapsed after he followed his own match with a run-in on Raven's match with Pitbull 2 (Douglas ended up being fine—the non-air-conditioned ECW Arena caused a lot of wrestlers a lot of discomfort over the years). The injuries started before the show did, as trainee Kareem Horton broke his leg when he slipped off of the top rope while practicing.

MIND GAMES

The ECW Arena was not the only uncomfortable place where the promotion held shows. In Rostraver, Pennsylvania, the building was The Ice Arena, a minor-league hockey venue.

"All they did was roll carpet out over the ice," said area fan Justin Kosanko. "There'd be impact, and ice shavings would just go flying."

At a show there in 1999, Kosanko sat behind two of wrestlings more infamous fans—Violent Jay and Shaggy 2 Dope, The Insane Clown Posse. The independent rappers were lifelong wrestling fans and turned up not only in ECW, but as performers for both WCW and the WWF in the late 1990s.

In a 1998 America Online chat, Paul Heyman told fans he would have liked to do more with the two violent clowns than was possible.

“They are obviously huge wrestling fans and have had the good taste to perform on ECW programs. I have no problem using ICP on future ECW events, and would even go so far as to suggest to you that if their schedule would get a little more flexible, that we would exploit their talents a little more prominently,” Heyman wrote.

The burgeoning crowds seemed to be evidence that ECW was growing and ready to take the next step. Television program *American Journal* did a piece on ECW in September 1996, as Heyman was negotiating to put ECW on pay-per-view, where he was convinced the company could make real money. ECW’s loose affiliation with the WWF grew stronger, too, as the two sides came to general terms on an angle that would pit the two companies against each other. It started on September 22, 1996, at the WWF’s *Mind Games* pay-per-view (headlined by ECW alum Mick Foley, now wrestling as Mankind, challenging Shawn Michaels for the WWF championship). During an early match between John “Justin Bradshaw” Layfield and Juan “Savio Vega” Rivera, the two brawled at ringside, until The Sandman shoved Layfield. Layfield turned, only to be confronted by both The Sandman and Tommy Dreamer. Later, Taz hopped the guardrail and paraded around ringside with a “Sabu fears Taz” sign.

Still, for all the apparent growth and exposure, Kimona left ECW. She had been involved in some of ECW’s more titillating moments (including the aforementioned ECW Arena striptease and being in a lesbian storyline with Beulah), but was leaving the company because she could make more money at her previous job—exotic dancing. Say what you will about WCW—that company never had performers leaving to make a better living working in nightclubs.

TOO MUCH TOO SOON?

The corporate arms of WCW also never held a show like ECW’s November 1, 1996, event in Staten Island, New York, which drew 735 people and a healthy $14,315 gate. Unfortunately, the building was without heat, and the temperature was right around the freezing mark. For all their

advances, problems like these hammered home that ECW was not anywhere near the level of WCW and WWF.

People who knew both Gordon and Heyman said Gordon voiced concerns that Heymans plans called for ECW to expand too far too fast.

Those in the company who supported Heyman said Gordon valued being a big fish, even if that meant swimming in a tiny pond. However, Gordons supporters said Gordon believed that Heymans expansion plan was a fiscally foolish one that would end up taking the company into new areas that would not support it.

ECW had survived for years off of tape sales and arena ticket sales, but Heyman was convinced pay-per-view money was the key to ECW's long-term survival, and once he purchased controlling interest in ECW from Gordon, he started moving toward making his pay-per-view dreams a reality.

And as ECW grew, so did the Dudleys. The newest addition was Little Spike, played by Matt Hyson. Hyson, a third-grade teacher originally from Rhode Island, regressed into the seeming simpleton (albeit a good-hearted simpleton) character of Spike.

There were still issues with talent out of control, as with an October 25, 1996, show in Jim Thorpe, in which New Jack got into an altercation with an off-duty police officer. The problem was settled without anyone going to jail, but New Jack was just getting warmed up.

CHAPTER 12

MASS TARNSIT

“I cut that boy deep. I cut the shit out of him”

–NEW JACK, FOREWER HARDCORE, DOUCMENTARY DVD

ON NOWEMBER 23, 1996, ECW had a house show in Revere, Massachusetts. One of the scheduled matches on the show was Axl Rotten and D-Von Dudley versus The Gangstas—New Jack and Mustafa. However, Rotten had travel problems, and ECW found itself scrambling for a substitute until a local volunteered to fill the slot.

The volunteer was a large young man named was Erich Kulas, but he told everyone backstage he worked as Mass Transit.

MEET ERICH KULAS

When Kulas and his mini-entourage arrived at the arena about two hours before the opening bell, most of the wrestlers were there as was the security team. Many of the wrestlers were stretching or warming up in the ring.

“I was standing right there at the front when he walked in,” Stu Kaplan said. “He came in about two hours before the show started with his dad, some other guy, and a midget wrestler. He looked maybe 19, with a big round baby face and a big round body. He just looked like a great big kid.”

In fact, that’s about what Kulas was. He was 17 although he claimed to be 23.

Kaplan said the Kulas group almost forced a confrontation within seconds of arriving.

“They started walking back like they were going to go through the curtain,” Kaplan said. “I said, ‘Can I help you?’ Kulas said, ‘We’re going to be on the show tonight.’”

Kaplan told the group to wait while he got someone with the company from the back.

“They started saying, That’s OK; we’ll go back there,’ and I just said, ‘No, *wait here*, and I’ll bring someone back to talk to you.’”

That someone turned out to be Taz, who talked briefly to the group and accompanied them behind the curtain.

Don Laible said he saw Kulas twice before the show started.

“I saw him sitting with a midget and his dad,” Laible said. “The next thing I know he’s in the back putting on a bus driver’s outfit.”

Kulas claimed he’d had two matches on the independent circuit, but that was the sum of his wrestling experience. However, Kulas’ father told Heyman that the 17-year-old had trained under Killer Kowalski, a wrestling legend who ran New England’s most prominent wrestling school (also among his graduates was current WWE main-eventer Paul “Triple H” Levesque).

Unfortunately, no one bothered to check that claim with Kowalski despite the fact that Killer Kowalski was backstage that night, because he was at many of the area shows.

Kulas immediately made a bad impression on his three fellow workers in the match, by asserting what he wanted to do in the match instead of shutting up and letting the veterans lead the way.

He did have one question—he had never bladed himself before to draw blood on his forehead, and he wanted to know if New Jack would do it for him.

New Jack was only too happy to agree. When the moment came in the match, New Jack helped Kulas get more *color* than anyone had expected.

THE DEEPEST CUT

Kaplan said he did not immediately realize a serious problem was breaking out in the ring, other than the substitute’s utter lack of wrestling ability or knowledge.

“The kid flat couldn’t work,” Kaplan said. “I mean he literally had zero talent. He couldn’t do *anything!* “

Then, Kaplan said, he saw the pool of blood in the ring.

“Well, so many of ECW’s matches were vicious, just because those guys went to extremes, no pun intended,” Kaplan said. “I was leaning on the mat when the Kulas kid was cut, and I remember I just said to myself, ‘This can’t be healthy’ I mean New Jack is New Jack, and I really love him to death, but I think at the point when I saw the cut and the amount of blood I knew this was definitely going to be a problem.”

The idea of *blading* is to create a small trickle of blood to mix with sweat and look like a lot of blood. In Kulas’ case, no sweat was needed, as New Jack cut him from ear to ear, while screaming, “He’s gonna die!”

Kulas did not seem to realize immediately what had happened, but he looked down seconds later and saw the puddle of blood. At that point, he started screaming and ended up being carried out of the arena on a stretcher.

“I was frightened, watching it, because it was well planned out,” Laible said. “What New Jack and Mustafa did to him was criminal; it really was. I was just inches away from him, and I swear, in all my years in wrestling, I never saw blood shooting out like that. The kid’s dad was yelling, ‘Stop!’ All he had was that midget with him, and what was a midget going to do to those guys, you know? I ran to the back and told Paul, ‘You’ve got to do something. They’re going to close the show.’ He just looked at me and said, ‘So?’”

The show did end up stopping while emergency workers tried to get Kulas out of the building.

At ringside, Kulas’ father was coming unglued.

“His father was out of control, as soon as he saw his kid go down bleeding,” Kaplan said. “I looked over, and Kulas was just lying on the mat. He looked like a whale out of water. I mean, he was not moving, and New Jack was still punching him and screaming about killing him although I think that was just New Jack trying to get the attention on him and off of the amount of blood this kid had lost. The father was screaming, ‘Stop this!’ and New Jack kept yelling, Tuck you!’ back at him.”

New Jack relented, and EMT crews eventually made it to ringside. By now, the boy’s father was apoplectic.

“He was screaming, ‘This isn’t part of the show! That’s my son!’ They were trying to get him to the dressing room, and his dad started making like he was coming into the ring,” Kaplan said. “I just looked at him and said, ‘You come to the ring, I’ll take *you* out.’”

In the ring, the medics were finding themselves soaking up more blood than they had pads for. Kaplan said it was the most blood he had seen in a single incident in his 20 years around the wrestling industry.

“It looked like a waterfall coming out of his head,” Kaplan said. “On the mat was this circle of blood that kept getting bigger and deeper. All their pads were soaked with blood, just turning from white to red in seconds.”

They got the bleeding stemmed, but trying to get the young man out of the ring proved to be another ordeal.

“He was so fat they couldn’t slide him under the ring,” Kaplan said.

EMT workers finally held the ropes to pass him through and were carrying him out, when the fans offered a rare show of sympathy for a few seconds.

“I mean they were thinking this kid was really hurt, so there was a little respect being shown for him, and then halfway down the aisle, he raised his arm off the stretcher! The whole thing just pissed me off,” Kaplan said.

“What amazed me was the kid was still working it,” Laible said. “As they’re taking him out on the stretcher, he lifts his arm and gives the crowd the finger.”

The feeling apparently was mutual. Fans serenaded the blood-gushing Kulas with chants of “You fat fuck!”, as EMTs took his stretcher out of the building. Minutes later, as New Jack walked back to the dressing room, fans high-fived him and patted him on the back, showing clear support for what he had done.

New Jack himself later told people, not without a hint of pride, “I cut the shit out of that boy.”

THE FALLOUT

Request Television Network president Hugh Panerò was less impressed. After seeing a tape of the attack, he announced that he would be canceling ECW’s contract for its first pay-per-view show, planned for April 1997.

Heyman's own words likely did not help, as he later described the attack as Kulas' "initiation" into wrestling.

Heyman negotiated with the company to try to get the show back on, even offering to tone down the content a little, but not too much. After all, ECW didn't have the prettiest bodies, the fancy setup, or the elaborate lighting system. What ECW did have was more blood than anyone else would offer, insane stunts involving tables and other items, and violence against women that neither WCW nor the WWF was willing to touch.

Soon after, a wrestling website reported that the *Pro Wrestling Torch*, a wrestling newsletter, had been responsible for the company's decision to pull the show. The story gained steam and has become almost accepted canon among some of the most hardcore of hardcore fans.

"The claim was the *Torch* had sent a tape of the Kulas incident to InDemand to sabotage *Barely Legal*, [ECW's first planned pay-per-view set for April 1997],'" said *Torch* columnist Bruce Mitchell. "It started on [rival wrestling website] lwrestling.com, and it was in the best interests of ECW to put that story out there, because it got everyone angry at us. The only thing is, it never happened—we never sent anything to InDemand. There was a ton of heat on us, but it was over a false claim. It really became hard to deal with, because ECW had become such a cause for some people. Now if any of us had done that, I'd admit it."

The owner of lwrestling.com was Bob Ryder, who handled travel for ECW.

Months after the Viewer's Choice issue, the University of Kentucky cancelled an ECW show planned for the campus over the same two issues —the Kulas incident and concerns over content in general.

However, Paul Richard, who promoted the Revere show in which Kulas became an involuntary blood donor, said no state, law enforcement, or broadcast official ever called him to question him about the incident.

Richard said he remembered seeing Kulas backstage that night before the match that would make him the most famous American teenaged wrestler of the 1990s (with the likely exception of Rey Misterio Jr.).

"I thought he was one of the paramedics, because the way he was dressed, that's what he looked like—a big, fat paramedic. The next time I saw him, he was flat on his back in the middle of the ring," Richard said.

TOO EXTREME FOR MAINSTREAM

Anyone who was paying attention could see the ugly truth behind what would be ECW's inevitable collapse—the things that made it so popular among its intensely loyal audience were the very things that meant ECW would never achieve mainstream success. Even going into 1997, ECW was illustrating that point. In May 1997, a two-part report aired on WJAR-TV in Providence. Reporter Dyana Koelsch focused the first part on the Kulas-New Jack incident with the second installment covering ECW fans' bloodlust in a more general sense. The most memorable moment in the segment was when the report cut from Heyman remarking that kids shouldn't be going to ECW events to a shot of kids having no problems buying tickets for an upcoming ECW show.

Axl Rotten said that especially as ECW expanded into new towns, a lot of people who came to the shows failed to realize that this was not the family-friendly wrestling of yesteryear.

"The truth is a lot of other audiences coming to ECW for the first time didn't expect the amount of blood and brutality they were going to see," he said. "I've seen people leaving and vomiting. You know it's Mom and Dad and the kids, and they're expecting to see Hulk Hogan and the Honkytonk Man, and the next thing they know people are saying the f-word, and there's blood splattering all over the place."

ECW's wildness even lent itself to the company's difficulty in holding onto arenas in a handful of cases. More than one ECW show ended with a near-riot and with building officials promising themselves they would never rent to "those wrestling maniacs" again. (One New England arena even became lost to ECW in late 1999 for reasons beyond ECW's control—the building had been sold and turned into a Buddhist temple.)

And for all of Heymans talk about stepping up to the next level, ECW was a company that had lost more than a dozen pieces of top talent and a company that had yet to draw 2,000 people to a show. But the company remained as influential as it was small. The WWF even tried to do its own ECW series with the January 7, 1997, debut of *WWF Shotgun Saturday Night*. The show bombed, however, because in its best moment, it resembled nothing so much as a watered-down version of ECW.

ECW's return to Revere, the same night *WWF Shotgun Saturday Night* made its debut, was another very scaled-back version of ECW. The only blood on the entire show was a small trickle on the head of The Sandman. The fans' reaction was to start a small chant of "ECW sucks!"

As for Erich Kulas, he filed a lawsuit that was still pending when ECW ceased to exist more than four years later. The case basically stalled out when Kulas died a year later. At 22, Erich Kulas died of complications from gastric bypass surgery.

CHAPTER 13

BARELY LEGAL

“Four years ago, the people who stand with me today took the city of Philadelphia by storm, took a town that was burned to the ground by the two big wrestling promotions, and they forgot where they came from! At ECW, we never forgot where we come from.”

–PAUL HEYMAN

“And in the wrestling world that promised land is called pay-per-view”

—SHANE DOUGLAS ON BARELY LEGAL

SOME OF THE COMPANY’S LONGTIME PERFORMERS decided they would believe an ECW pay-per-view was a reality when they saw it and not a minute before.

“To me, it just never seemed like it was really a reality,” Axl Rotten said. “It was on and off, on and off. It was kind of like Ross Perot running for president. No one believed it was going to happen.”

But after months of haggling and additional weeks of trying to undo the harm the Kulas incident did to the company, it really was going to happen.

Elizabeth Tutt was event manager with Premiere, one of the pay-per-view companies debating whether to carry an ECW pay-per-view. Her duties included handling all wrestling pay-per-views.

“There definitely were some concerns about the level of violence and concerns that this stuff wasn’t for children, whereas other wrestling at that time was more geared for kids,” she said. “This was something different.”

Company officials talked to Heyman, who tried to assuage their concerns, but what made the difference was the outcry from ECW fans themselves.

“Eventually what happened was, we started receiving hundreds of emails from fans,” Tutt said. “These were well-written, well thought-out letters, not rants from screaming, crazy people. We read every one of them, and that’s what got ECW on pay-per-view.”

Premiere ended up carrying the show, but other companies, including Viewer’s Choice, did not. Still it was a start for a company with participants who never thought they would make it that far.

DIRECTING A FIRST

With the negotiations over, ECW was ready to appear on its biggest stage to date—national pay-per-view. At the buildings first ECW show in January 1997 (which was also the debut of a talented athlete named Lance Evers, who wrestled as Lance Storm), Tod Gordon announced the ECW Arena would be home to *Barely Legal on*. April 13. He noted that WCW would be shooting an episode of *Nitro* in the Philadelphia Spectrum on April 14, but promised fans that the bigger company would have a lot to live up to.

"Everybody was abuzz," said Stu Kaplan, whose Boston-based Stuart Security supplemented the ECW Arena security crew, Atlas Protection, for the inaugural pay-per-view. "Everyone wanted to make sure it went off perfectly."

Although Heyman had won the battle to get ECW put back on the pay-per-view schedule (something he credited to fans petitioning the cable systems), he would not have carte blanche. Pay-per-view industry officials were adamant about one thing—ECW had to get a director for *Barely Legal* who had experience shooting live events, something ECW's production staff did not have. The company got a man who combined his extensive sports experience with Charlie Bruzesse's and Ron Buffone's product knowledge and style of direction to make a pay-per-view that was truly distinct.

When he started directing ECW pay-per-views in 1997, Michael Vettor was a 14-year veteran of sports television, having directed everything from college basketball and the National Hockey League to King of the Cage shoot fighting events, soccer, lacrosse, and fitness programs. He had also served as a staff producer for ESPN's *SportsCenter*.

So what did Vettor do with all this experience?

"Throw it all away," Vettor said, laughing. "This was a completely different animal."

The first thing Vettor said he noticed was the vociferous audience.

"The following it had was just amazing to me," Vettor said. "It was like a cult. My very first show at the arena, and the electricity was just unbelievable. I like to do my homework, and I had been to a WWF show, to

see what it was about, and that didn't come close to preparing me for ECW."

Vettor said Tommy Dreamer, in particular, helped him to understand the nuances of presenting wrestling on television.

"My problem was learning and understanding each wrestler and what he did best until I talked to Dreamer," Vettor said. "He gave me great insight into each wrestler and what their strengths were, so I'd know what to look for. From there, I started to get to know the wrestlers, but with Dreamers help, it was much easier."

Vettor would go on to direct every ECW pay-per-view.

IT'S SHOWTIME

Many people backstage were noticeably nervous before the show.

"I know I was really nervous, because this was the first time I was to perform live [on television]," Francine said. "I was so scared that I would mess up, but I didn't [thank God]. We were all nervous really, because this was a big deal for us, as a company. We just wanted to prove to everyone that we could be just as good as the other companies. And that is exactly what we did."

Heyman, in particular, seemed to be on taut nerves as the event approached. Pay-per-view, he had told his crew, would be the thing that got ECW over the hump and on the way to long-term stability, something the company had never known. Now, *Barely Legal* was upon ECW, and Heyman knew it was make or break. He was also plagued by what he saw as WCW "raiding" his talent, despite the fact that the departing wrestlers themselves were the ones making the initial contacts.

The show started on an ominous note, as Joey Styles got into the ring to welcome the fans to the show. Styles tried to talk, but there was no sound. As he banged on the microphone, Heyman was screaming into the headset to anyone who would listen, "His mike is dead! His mike is dead!"

Someone found him another microphone, seconds before the show started, and Styles was able to get the crowd pumped for its pay-per-view

debut, telling the crowd, “This is our first pay-per-view, and we want to hear you!”

Not that the fans in the ECW Arena ever had a hard time being heard, but they heeded Joey Styles’ call that night. They were ready, and so was everyone else connected to the show. The wrestlers had on their best ring gear and fresh-waxed boots. Even the security crew had on pressed outfits.

And when the show began, Styles was standing in the ring while the crowd of nearly 1,200 chanted, “ECW! ECW!”

Ring announcer Bob Artese said the magnitude of the event struck him as he was on his way to the ring that night.

“Maybe it was because I had those two other jobs and wasn’t totally 100 percent a wrestling junkie like a lot of the guys were, but I was really doing it for fun and for the camaraderie in the locker room, so I didn’t get all caught up in it,” Artese said. “Sometimes it’s not bad to approach it that way, because that way, I don t get all worked up and nervous about it ahead of time. I don’t know if it ever hit me how big a deal this was until I got out there and saw the lights and the crowd.”

The *Barely Legal* broadcast started off with a bit designed to show new viewers to expect the unexpected on ECW shows. Tod Gordon announced that The Eliminators would have to forfeit the tag-team belts, because Perry Saturn would be out with a knee injury for months. Instead, John Kronus battled both Buh Buh and D-Von Dudley, now both firmly entrenched as villains, and won after Saturn intervened. Perry Saturn’s few seconds of action proved one of the gutsiest performances of the night. Saturn, bad knee and all, climbed to the top rope and delivered a flying elbow onto Buh Buh and pinned him to win the match and, to the shock of many, keep the titles.

The show also featured the resolution (or so it initially appeared) of the long-simmering feud between Taz and Sabu. In announcing the match, Styles made reference to the genuine enmity that existed between the two men, saying, “If you think you’re smart to wrestling, 111 tell you one thing. These two men hate each other.”

Longtime heel Taz won the match, but then offered Sabu a handshake for giving him “the fight of my life.” Sabu shook his hand, but the next few minutes turned each man, as Sabu joined Rob Van Dam in beating Taz senseless. Bill Alphonso, Taz’s manager for more than a year, came into the ring, but took off his “Taz” shirt to reveal a “Sabu” shirt. The move didn’t

get Sabu the long-term fan hatred Heyman had wanted, but it did allow the fans to cheer Taz, something they had wanted to do for months.

The person who seemed to build the most equity, though, was Rob Van Dam. His match was as spectacular as his past exhibitions, but he let loose after beating Lance Storm. Van Dam noted he was not originally scheduled to wrestle on the show (he ended up substituting for an injured Chris Candido) and said that the win made him more valuable to ECW. Then, playing on the ECW fans' instilled "us versus them" attitude, he added that the showing also made him more valuable to other companies.

After laying out Taz, Van Dam drew a cascade of boos from ECW fans by saying, "I love to work Mondays," a reference to the bigger companies' flagship programs.

Van Dam was legitimately hot about originally not being scheduled on the show, and he was not the only one. New Jack and Axl Rotten were both furious at being left off of *Barely Legal*, considering the roles their chaotic personas played in appealing to the rabidly loyal audience.

With his first shot at exposing a national audience to the differences between Extreme Championship Wrestling and the "Big Two," Heyman made sure to emphasize every difference in a way that seemed to show them as evidence that ECW's stars were tougher than their more well-financed counterparts in WCW and the WWF.

At one point during the show, Styles even pointed out, "No pretty blue mats on the floor here in ECW. This ain't Disney World."

In the main event, Terry Funk overcame all odds to win the ECW title, first winning a three-way contenders' match against Stevie Richards and The Sandman and then triumphing over Raven.

Seconds after his win, Funk went into the crowd to celebrate, and the show went off the air. The timing could not have been better—the show went off almost immediately after the last match ended, and seconds before power in the building cut out.

Front-row regular John Bailey said the aftermath of Funks title win was one of the most emotional wrestling moments he had experienced.

"He came right into the crowd, and said, 'We did it! We did it!' It actually made me cry, and it almost makes me cry just to think about it now," Bailey said.

Funk said the moment was an emotional one for him as well.

“That’s because it had been a big night for me and for the fans,” Funk said. “As far as recognition goes, this was a chance for the company to possibly become a bit more than what it was.”

Funk said people backstage also got caught up in the emotion of the last few minutes, largely because of the realization they had pulled off what many had never thought possible.

“They all had lumps in their throats, even Paul E.,” Funk said. “They knew they had truly been a part of building something and having it become at least somewhat successful. The crowd was the same way—they were *part* of it, and I know that sounds like horseshit, but they had really become part of it. That night, that moment, *that* was what ECW was supposed to be. I watched every one of the matches that night, and they all made me really proud just to be part of that company.”

Funk said his decision to go into the stands was spontaneous.

“I went out to include that crowd in that moment, because that was what made us what we were, from having the ring fill up with chairs on request to all the chants and the passion of those people who wanted us to be different,” he said.

Any postshow celebration was short lived, however. Ten days after *Barely Legal* aired, Raven gave his notice. He was headed to WCW after accepting a three-year, $225,000 contract.

THE RISING SUN STARS

One of the more memorable matches on the card featured six members of the Japanese group Michinoku Pro. Michinoku Pro was a company based on lighter, high-flying performers, such as Dick Togo, Super Delfin, Taka Michinoku, Sho Funaki, and company head The Great Sasuke. The story behind their appearance embodied the chaos of wrestling in general and ECW in particular, which was often wilder than what happened in the ring.

The seeds for the Japanese stars’ appearance were sown nearly a year earlier, and that match ended up having a more sizable impact on the World Wrestling Federation in the long run.

In 1996, Sheldon Goldberg, who now promotes the independent wrestling group New England Championship Wrestling, was publisher of a newsletter called *Mat Marketplace*.

After getting inquiries from readers about it, he contacted Michinoku Pro and asked about the availability of the company's merchandise.

Goldberg ended up talking to company official Koji Hirai, who was very interested in finding out how to sell Michinoku Pro merchandise stateside. Hirai came to the States that winter, and Goldberg introduced him to some area promoters, including Goldbergs partner, Tony Rumble.

Goldberg also introduced Hirai to Heyman at an ECW show in Revere, Massachusetts.

"Paul was being his usual ebullient self and said he had his first pay-per-view coming up, and he would love to have Michinoku Pro guys on the show," Goldberg said.

A couple of weeks later, Goldberg got another call from Hirai in Japan.

"He said he'd see me soon," Goldberg said. "I said, 'Really?' He said, 'Yes, Sasuke is coming, too. We'll be here in February to negotiate to appear on the pay-per-view, and you're going to handle the business for us.'"

That weekend in February 1997 was a busy one for wrestling in the New England area. ECW had shows in Revere and Webster, Tony Rumble was running a show, and the WWF was running in Lowell. Over the course of the weekend, The Great Sasuke, Michinoku Pro's top star, immersed himself in the American wrestling scene.

Michinoku Pro also sent wrestlers Beef Wellington and Lenny Lane to Rumble's show. WCW booker Kevin Sullivan was also at Rumble's show that night, and Lane's performance on that show got him a job with WCW.

The ECW-Michinoku Pro arrangement was almost over before it began due to a problem with payment. The problem? Michinoku Pro was having a hard time getting it.

"Paul was supposed to send a deposit and never did," liaison Goldberg said. "Tod, by this point, was getting out, and he told me how complicated it was to get on pay-per-view. The last thing they needed was to hear from me about how $10,000 that was supposed to have been sent to Japan wasn't."

Heyman became worried Sasuke and company would not appear, because as of days before the show, the Japanese still had no check.

Goldberg assured him they would appear, but told Heyman, “When they get off that plane, they’d better have a check from you.”

Heyman said not to worry, that a check would be waiting at the Holiday Inn where wrestlers for the show were staying.

“So, of course, when we got to the hotel, there was no check,” Goldberg said.

The night before *Barely Legal*, Paul Heyman held a banquet to honor Terry Funk. Brief excerpts of the banquet appear in the wrestling documentary *Beyond the Mat*.

When the banquet was over, Goldberg was waiting for Heyman. The money Heyman owed the Japanese was now $25,000, their entire appearance fee, because the time for any payment to truly be an advance was over.

“I told him there was still this little matter of a check,” Goldberg said. “He asked me, ‘Where are you going to be in an hour?’ I said, ‘Right behind you, because I’m not leaving your side until I have a check for $25,000.’”

Heyman eventually convinced Goldberg to meet him back at the hotel.

“Paul’s just one of those people who even when he pisses you off, you can’t help but be charmed by him,” Goldberg said. “It’s one of his true gifts.”

Twenty-five minutes after Goldberg arrived at the hotel, Heyman walked in. The two men went up to Heyman’s room, where Heyman finally wrote the check for which Goldberg and the Michinoku Pro wrestlers had been waiting.

“Paul asked me what he could do for me in all this,” Goldberg said. “I said, ‘Paul, I’m really not in this to enrich myself. I want to see you guys succeed. Let’s just take care of business, and everybody will be happy.’”

Sasuke later promised to pay Goldberg for his work, but Goldberg never saw a cent (or a *yen)* from Michinoku Pro.

When Sasuke and his associates got off the plane in Philadelphia, the day of the show, Goldberg was waiting with a $25,000 check that left Sasuke “overjoyed.” By that point, Sasuke had believed he was not going to get paid at all and had been willing to swallow the loss in order for the chance to make a splash on U.S. pay-per-view.

However, Sasuke ended up making $20,000 for the match, with the other wrestlers splitting what was left over after paying for airfare.

“But they ended up paying their own hotel, too, so divide that between six guys, that ends up being not a lot of money,” Goldberg said. “But they were kids in a candy store, and they didn’t care that they were never paid more than next to nothing.”

The day after *Barely Legal*, Sasuke and company went to Stamford, Connecticut, to meet with the WWFs Jim Ross and Bruce Prichard. By then people were already raving about the six-man match.

Sasuke and in-ring rival Taka Michinoku got booked for the WWFs July pay-per-view although Ross inadvertently dealt Sasuke’s ego a blow. Ross had stacks of Japanese magazines, but did not recognize Sasuke without his mask and asked him, “Which one are you?”

Goldberg said Sasuke’s ego ultimately spoiled his WWF deal.

“Sasuke saw himself as the second coming of [legendary Japanese wrestler and promoter Antonio] Inoki,” Goldberg said. “He wanted to get himself over in the States, where Inoki couldn’t.”

Vince McMahon green-lighted the light-heavyweight division, with Sasuke playing a key role, but Sasuke infuriated the WWF when he held a press conference in Japan to announce he would be the division’s first champion, even though the WWF had agreed to nothing of the sort.

“At that point, [WWF] brought in [Puerto Rico promoter] Victor Quinones, and he and Sasuke didn’t get along anyway, so Quinones said, ‘Screw this guy—we’ll just take his top guys and leave him in the dust,’” Goldberg said.

Taka Michinoku stole Sasuke’s thunder with a spectacular performance that made him the star of the match. That performance made Sasuke dispensable.

“He blew it,” Goldberg said. “If he had kept his mouth shut and played his cards right, he could have been the WWFs representative there.... He could have made any deal he wanted to make.”

Sasuke found himself effectively locked out of the U.S. wrestling scene. He would not work with WCW, where political rival Ultimo Dragon reigned. The WWF no longer needed him, and Sasuke suddenly found himself willing to forgive ECW’s failure to make the advance payment for *Barely Legal*

“Sasuke was a creature of ego,” Goldberg said. “He wasn’t about money. He would make a lousy financial deal to be a bigger star. He

decided he wanted to work with Paul Heyman again after the WWF thing fell through for him."

Heyman even did what he could to assuage the conflict between Goldberg and Sasuke.

"Paul actually paid me money he didn't have to pay me," Goldberg said. "It was just a few hundred bucks, which was just a drop in the bucket of what Sasuke had promised me, but it was a nice gesture and I appreciated it. I had never wanted to be paid, but when Sasuke promised it to me, I felt like it was a matter of principle."

CHAPTER 14

WWF VERSUS ECW?

“This bingo hall oughtta be built out of toilet paper, because there’s nothing in it but shit!”

–JERRY LAWLER AT *WRESTLEPALOOZA 1997*

ALTHOUGH PAUL HEYMAN’S BEHIND-THE-SCENES RELATIONSHIP with the WWF was never acknowledged during ECW’s life, the company had an on-air war with the WWF, represented in the form of *Raw* announcer, veteran wrestler, and Eddie Gilbert idol Jerry “The King” Lawler. The feud capitalized on fans’ feelings about the real-life talent migrations that had hurt ECW.

John “Hat Guy” Bailey said the talent losses had become obvious even to the most loyal of fans.

“We realized it was bad when they started raiding talent,” Bailey said. “ECW started to lose a lot of heavy hitters at once.”

These losses were in ECW fans’ faces—the WWF’s *Cold Day in Hell* pay-per-view on May 11, 1997, featured Flash Funk (Charles Skaggs, who had wrestled for WCW and ECW as Too Cold Scorpio) losing in the opener to Hunter Hearst Helmsley. Every match except one (Ken Shamrock versus Vader) on that pay-per-view featured at least one former ECW star.

EXPANDED HORIZONS

And during this time ECW was also adding new venues, running debut shows in Syracuse and Buffalo in May 1997. The Buffalo crowd of 1,697 was one of the company’s biggest to that point. A few weeks later, ECW topped that crowd with 1,900 in Monaca, Pennsylvania.

As the company’s circuit expanded, Bob Artese remained ECW’s primary ring announcer, but he was not able to make it to all of the shows

when they strayed farther from ECW's traditional Philadelphia base.

"I had two full-time jobs, so I did all shows I could get to without taking time off," he said. "Philadelphia, the other Pennsylvania shows, New Jersey, and Delaware were no problem, and I would travel whenever I could."

Artese also continued to ring announce the pay-per-views, giving them some continuity.

Now ECW was going to attempt its own version of WCW's New World Order angle. Over the previous 12 months, WCW had become the hottest company in wrestling with the NWO (as the group was called for short) angle. The idea of the feud was that the NWO represented invading factions from outside WCW. Specifically, early NWO appearances strongly hinted that initial members Scott Hall and Kevin Nash were emissaries of WWF owner Vince McMahon in his quest to take the wrestling war to WCW.

In an age when many fans read whatever they could about wrestling in newsletters and on the Internet in an effort to understand what went on behind the scenes, fans were still willing to believe that the companies hated each other. That was the key to the New World Order's success, and that was a feeling Heyman was hoping the Lawler angle could replicate.

The New World Order was also something that became a target of Stevie Richards' most well-remembered parodies. Originally intended as another one-night joke, the *Blue* World Order took on a life of its own. Richards became Big Stevie Cool, a knockoff of NWO leader Kevin Nash's Big Daddy Cool persona; The Meanie emulated Scott Hall as he exhorted fans to "say hello to the blue guy"; and Nova (who started out as a henchman to a henchman to a henchman) became "Hollywood Nova," wearing a weight belt and fake stubble that still looked more real than what parody inspiration Hollywood Hulk Hogan was wearing. The BWO (as it became known) even became one of ECW's top T-shirt sellers briefly.

DAMNING THE COMPETITION

As summer 1997 heated up, the heat also continued on Rob Van Dam, as he became the guy with the only gimmick guaranteed to get over as a heel in ECW—disloyalty to ECW itself.

The seeds of the WWF-ECW feud had been planted in fall 1996 when ECW stars "crashed" the WWF's *Mind Games* pay-per-view. It intensified not on WWF nor ECW television, but on the USWA Wrestling TV show of Jerry Lawler's Memphis promotion. Lawler's territory (with partner Jerry Jarrett) had been one of the dozens of regional groups in the 1970s. By 1997, it was just about the last one left, not because of any genius in promotions, but because the groups star—Lawler, who was also the co-owner—was protected from McMahon's reach, and down the card the payouts were peanuts compared to the other regions. In May 1997, Lawler had challenged anyone from ECW to try him on for size.

A few weeks later, on June 7, 1997, Tommy Dreamer appeared on Lawler's Memphis program to accept Lawler's challenge.

That night, Lawler had an answer to Dreamer at ECW's *Wrestlepalooza 1997* event. Dreamer had just beaten Raven for the first time to cap off their 30-month feud. The match was Raven's last before going to WCW, and the ECW faithful serenaded him with a "You sold out!" chant.

After Dreamer scored the climactic pin, Joey Styles exclaimed, "Its the greatest night of his life! Tommy Dreamer has beaten Raven!" And then, as the saying goes, some idiot turned out the lights.

When the lights came back on, Rob Van Dam was in the ring, wearing a *Monday Night Raw* shirt, which succeeded in getting the fans' ire. Van Dam and Bill Alphonso attacked Dreamer, and then the lights went off again. When they returned, Sabu was in the ring and joined in on the attack.

Just when things didn't seem like they could get worse for Dreamer, the lights went off a third time. When they came back up, Lawler was in the ECW ring, and the four men laid waste to Dreamer. Heyman, in an attempt to add legitimacy to the angle, made a rare on-screen appearance and tried to run in, but Lawler gave him a few kicks as well. In a way, it was like old home week for Heyman, who worked as manager Paul E. Dangerously for Lawler's Memphis group in 1987, Heyman's second regular gig in the wrestling business.

Lawler's comments during the attack over the microphone cut a little close to home. He called ECW's stars "has beens or never wases" and said,

“Well, let’s shoot, OK? Your little organization, ECW, is not even a pimple on the ass of the World Wrestling Federation!”

The villainous quartet continued to work over Dreamer, as well as The Sandman and The Gangstas, who tried to save him. It took Taz to run the invaders out of the ring.

Driving home the seriousness of the attack was the total lack of announcing from Styles while it was going on.

The angle proved to be the start of a rolling stream-of-consciousness series of events, as Taz then demanded his rematch with Sabu right there and then. When Sabu scored the pin to even their series, Taz found himself mocked by Shane Douglas. “The Franchise” had been taking in the whole thing from the back of the arena and scoffed when Taz challenged him for his TV title on the spot. The challenge ended up being Taz would leave ECW for 60 days if he could not make Douglas tap out in three minutes or less. Douglas was the picture of heelish arrogance as he strolled to the ring. Less than three minutes later, Taz was the new ECW television champion.

That angle, which led to two matches, one right after the other, became a single episode of ECW television, and it was the kind of fast-paced excitement that no other company was offering.

Heyman himself later called that hour of television his favorite in ECW’s history.

“That one hour of nonstop action, that one hour of progressing all of our storylines, that one hour of highlighting so many of our top pieces of talent, that one hour was as exhilarating as any hour I have been privileged to experience in this company,” he wrote in a 1998 America Online chat between him and a group of fans.

Two nights later, as Raven was making his WCW debut on *Monday Nitro*, ECW invaded *WWF Monday Night Raw*.

Van Dam toppled Flash Funk, and ECW stars began a three-week stint on the show. WWF management, however, soured on Van Dam and Sabu, in particular, because of perceived “attitude” problems and the daredevil style they worked. The conflicts led to the WWF scrapping plans for a Sabu and Rob Van Dam versus Tommy Dreamer and The Sandman match at *Summer Slam 1997*, the WWF’s second-biggest pay-per-view of the year.

The WWF experience proved a real eye-opener for Van Dam, who had been told more than once that McMahon had Heyman wrapped around his finger, a popular rumor among wrestlers at that time. The match in question

pitted Van Dam against Jesse James. The WWF plan was for the two wrestlers to go to a draw with no winner. Van Dam refused because he was a top ECW wrestler while James (at that point) was a lower-midcard guy in the WWF. A draw would do nothing for James and would devalue Van Dam. He offered to either beat James or do a draw with one of the WWF's top stars.

McMahon reportedly tried to appeal to Van Dam to come to the "big-time" WWF, telling him McMahon wanted him in the WWF someday soon. Van Dam's reply?

"I'm happy where I am, but thanks anyway."

Van Dam finally said he would be willing to go along with the plan *if* Heyman approved it. Some expected Heyman to go along, but he didn't. Heyman told McMahon Van Dam would not, in fact, be going to a draw with Jesse James.

At the June 29 *Orgy of Violence* show, the "inter-promotional feud" reached a potentially dangerous level, and for once the danger had nothing to do with a planned stunt or angle.

After another Lawler attack angle, wherein he and surprise guest Jim Cornette, now a full-time WWF employee, walloped Dreamer and The Sandman (at least one of the shots went awry, because Dreamer had to go to the hospital to get fluid drained from one of his testicles after it was over).

Like last time, the angle ended when Taz came in, which caused the villains to scurry out of the ring. Taz then spotted a fan with a *Raw* T-shirt on, and some of the fans had seen the guy also. The scene had the potential to turn ugly, which Taz apparently recognized, as he responded with a little admiration for the fans continued refusals to hand Taz the shirt.

"You got a pair of balls on you," Taz told him. "I got some respect for you. Now give up the shirt."

The fan finally passed Taz the shirt, and Taz burned the shirt in the ring as the fans cheered.

Cornette's appearance that night was contingent upon Heymans willingness to apologize publicly (backstage) to Coraluzzo over the 1994 incident with Shane Douglas and the NWA title. Coraluzzo was more interested in Heyman giving ECW stars permission to work Coraluzzo shows on their nights off.

The apology happened in private in the back of a limousine, and the promised permission for ECW guys to work for Coraluzzo never seemed to

come.

FRIENDS OR FOES?

For all the hostility displayed in the feud, the relationship between ECW and the WWF was far from unfriendly.

Behind the scenes Heyman regularly gave what came to be known as “Fuck Vince!” speeches as part of his pre-show motivational address to the wrestlers. By 1997 many of them were no longer buying it, however.

Rumors that Heyman had been working with McMahon became prevalent in the locker room, although most of the wrestlers refused to believe them. In 1997, however, one ECW wrestler said he and a few others found solid proof that Heyman was on the WWF payroll just by picking up a telephone. One of the wrestlers called the WWF’s corporate headquarters in Stamford, Connecticut, known as “Titan Towers,” and asked for Paul Heyman. The WWF operator courteously transferred the wrestler to Heymans voicemail.

Paul Heyman was someone who seemed to love the art of the work, mixing reality with fantasy, whether that meant devising an angle for ECW Arena fans, delivering pre-show stump speeches with an “us versus them” message, or nearly flaunting his relationship with an outside party while showing he shared more confidence in his own people.

One ECW star remembered sitting in an ECW office with Heyman and a couple of other performers when the telephone rang. It was McMahon. Heyman had him on speaker, and he shushed the other people in the office.

McMahon asked Heyman if he was alone, and Heyman, without hesitation, said, “Yes.”

Heyman and McMahon were no strangers to each other even before McMahons publicly stated first awareness of ECW at the WWF’s 1995 *King of the Ring* pay-per-view. The working relationship between ECW and the WWF intensified in late 1996 when McMahon contacted Heyman because McMahon had his eye on a few ECW talents.

McMahon wanted Terry Gordy, who had made many in the industry take notice with his seeming resurgence, as well as the tag team of Doug

Furnas and Phil LaFon. McMahon also wanted Too Cold Scorpio, but therein lay a problem. Creatively, Heyman told friends he would be willing to let Scorpio go, because he had done everything he could with the talented aerialist. However, Tommy Boy Records had a deal with ECW in which the label promoted its music as Scorpio's entrance theme. Generally, following segments that featured Scorpio, a commercial for the label would air. Heyman told McMahon about the deal, but McMahon wanted Scorpio badly enough that he told Heyman he would pay the $ 1,000 a week to ECW that the Tommy Boy deal was worth.

That $1,000 a week would become the source of speculation, especially during the revisionist history lessons leading up to and including *The Rise and Fall of FCW DVD* that WWE released in 2004, but that money was not a salary for Heyman or any kind of payment to him personally. It was money that went into ECW to make up for the loss of Scorpio and the accompanying revenue stream.

And when McMahon decided to try his own hour of daring television called *Shotgun Saturday Night* and clearly inspired by ECW, he called upon Heyman to help him find a nightclub in which to tape the shows. Heyman, who had worked as a publicity agent for New York's famed Studio 54 before he entered pro wrestling, knew whom to talk to in the New York club community. In exchange for working (defined as getting McMahon into hot New York nightclubs and introducing him to key players in that scene) for just a couple of nights, McMahon carried commercials for ECW pay-per-views on the syndicated *Shotgun* series. He also asked Heyman to announce *Shotgun*, but Heyman turned him down.

Still, more than one wrestler warned Heyman that McMahon would screw him at the earliest opportunity, and more than one wrestler recalled McMahon privately referring to ECW never by name, but as the *bingo-hall company*.

STYLES CLASH

As the ECW-WWF relationship went public while appearing to be a war, a real conflict was brewing. Since leaving ECW at the end of 1995,

Steve Austin had floundered briefly in the WWF before becoming one of the hottest stars in wrestling history with the Stone Cold character. His ascent was underway in 1997 when the WWF released his first home video, *'Cause Stone Cold Said So*. One of the vignettes was Austins Hulk Hogan impression from his debut in ECW. Announcer Joey Styles was pictured briefly in that clip and was not very happy about it.

Styles filed a federal lawsuit, alleging the WWF used his likeness without permission. The suit eventually ended in a settlement in July 2000. The terms of the settlement were not released, but subsequent runs of the Austin video did not contain Styles' brief appearance at the end of Austins Hogan promo.

As the final showdown between Lawler and Dreamer, defender of ECW's honor, loomed, a funny thing started happening. The smarmy, cocky Rob Van Dam started getting cheers. Van Dams breathtaking moves were finally overcoming his intensely heel persona, because the ECW flock began to appreciate his defiance of gravity in entertaining them.

ECW also hit a milestone during this period—its first crowd of 2,000. The record crowd came for an August 2, 1997, show in Monaca, Pennsylvania. The main event pitted ECW champ Terry Funk, wrestling as a heel for the night, against hometown hero Shane Douglas. As a show of appreciation for the fan support, Heyman announced that ECW's third pay-per-view, *November to Remember 1997*, would emanate from Monaca.

SECOND TIME'S NOT THE CHARM

But before that could happen, ECW had to get through its second pay-per-view, *Hardcore Heaven 1997*. That show came from Fort Lauderdale and was besieged by problems, ranging from lighting and production glitches to a WWF-like goofy skit in which The Sandman commandeered an ambulance and searched in vain for the War Memorial Auditorium, where the show was being held. The highlight of the night, in terms of emotion, was Tommy Dreamer's long-built match with Jerry Lawler.

Conversely, the show's lowlight was Mustafa not appearing, meaning The Gangstas lost the tag titles via forfeit to the Dudleys, who promptly

defeated PG-13 (a Memphis tag team) in their first title defense.

Mustafa's disappearance was not his own idea. Friction between The Gangstas came to a head before the show, as each man thought he was the one carrying the team. Their conflict reached the point that Heyman had to choose—one would stay and one would go. Mustafa was perfectly competent in the ring, but New Jack was the charisma and personality of The Gangstas, and Heymans choice was not a particularly difficult one.

Shane Douglas won the *Hardcore Heaven* main event, capturing the title over champions Sabu and Funk.

"I don't think the fans would have accepted anyone else at that point," Funk said. "Shane fit that mold perfectly; he *was The* Franchise. He *lived The* Franchise."

Sabu had become champion eight days earlier, defeating Funk in a brutal barbed-wire match at the ECW Arena. During that match, Sabu showed his toughness to anyone who doubted it when he sliced open his arm while taking a bump into the barbed wire. The cut went deep, all the way to the muscle. Sabu grunted to manager Alphonso, who produced a roll of athletic tape. Sabu literally taped his arm together and went ahead to finish the match.

Right before the three-way title match that capped off *Hardcore Heaven*, Dreamer defeated Lawler once and for all, ending the feud with ECW triumphant over the small corner of the WWF that Lawler represented.

But the big winner in the deal, long-term, would be the WWF. While WCW was stomping McMahons company in the Monday night ratings, McMahon would ultimately triumph through a combination of three incredible pieces of talent (Steve Austin, Mick Foley, and later Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson) and modified versions of ECW ideas, which would be repackaged as WWF "Attitude."

CHAPTER 15

THE SPLIT AND OTHER FAREWELLS

“My name is Paul Heyman, and I am the executive producer and talent coordinator of Extreme championship Wrestling. It’s a job that was given to me, on september 18, 1993, by the founder of this promotion, Tod Gordon. It is, therefore, my responsibility to inform the public with a heavy heart, earlier this week, ECW accepted the resignation of Tod Gorden as commissioner of Extreme championship Wrestling. Citing increasing pressures as the father of four children and running a family business, Tod could no longer assume the responsibility of being ECW’s commmissioner. We here at Extreme championship Wrestling wish Tod nothing but the best in all of his future endeavors and want to let him know that we intend to make him proud as we carry on his version of ECW.”

—PAUL HEYMAN ON ECW TELEVISION SEPTEMBER 1997

THAT WAS THE PUBLIC EXPLANATION. Here's the rest of the story.

By 1997 tension already existed between Heyman and WCW executive Terry Taylor, because in 1996 Heyman threatened to sue Taylor over Taylor calling ECW champion The Sandman a drug addict on the WCW Hotline. Taylor had to issue a clarification on a subsequent report, saying he was only referring to The Sandman's on-air character.

But Gordon did not view Taylor as an enemy. By 1997 rumors were rampant about a "mole" in the locker room, recruiting ECW stars for WCW. In truth, there were either zero, one, or two moles, depending on how you looked at it. WCW sources said that Heyman and Gordon both had contacts in WCW. Although revisionist WWE history paints WCW as the bad guy in the ECW story, Kevin Sullivan said that every piece of defecting talent called WCW first. And Sullivan always let Heyman know when an ECW talent was being signed. Taylor was Gordons WCW contact.

Sullivan said the same process occurred every time he was involved.

"I was on the phone with Paul E.; every time we wanted someone, we asked Paul," Sullivan said. "I had a very open relationship with Paul E."

So why were ECW's top stars often looking to go to WCW?

"It's simple—it's all based on money," Sullivan said. "If you're paid nightly when you work for ECW eight times a month and someone offers you a yearly contract for three years guaranteed, what are you going to do? I don't understand people who go back in time and look at it like this was nirvana. This sport, it's your livelihood, and you've got to go where money is. The Beatles didn't end up playing taverns after they hit on *The Ed Sullivan Show."*

But some ECW veterans said what Gordon pulled was on another level altogether.

By the end of 1996, a fairly pronounced Philadelphia clique had emerged backstage—Sabu, The Sandman, Bill Alphonso, and Tod Gordon.

Beset by physical problems, some in the locker room said Sabu was becoming very difficult backstage. According to people close to both men, the real reason Heyman had turned Sabu heel after *Barely Legal* was so that if the problems came to a head and Heyman had to get rid of Sabu, the fans wouldn't see his departure as the loss of a hero.

Gordon seemed to be having problems as well. One person claiming to be a friend of Gordon's, at the time, said Gordon himself was the biggest problem of all. The person said that one night Gordon even showed up with

half of his mustache singed off, and Gordon did not appear to notice it had happened.

Although he had sold Heyman his ECW interests in May 1995, just before the paychecks started coming from HHG Inc., Gordon was still a performer and on the payroll. Gordon was also one of the loudest complainers about pay-per-view payoffs. This was a new arena for ECW's roster, and many of them were not familiar with the months of delays involved in getting checks from cable and satellite companies. Some even appeared to believe that they would be getting checks comparable to the ones their friends in the WWF were getting. Of course, *Barely Legal* had only drawn a fraction of the viewers a typical WWF pay-per-view would see.

Heyman and Gordon were still at odds over how to proceed, with Gordon resistant to every move to expand ECW beyond its regional base in the Northeast. Gordons friends in the company said he wanted only to ensure the company he had founded would survive, while those philosophically closer to Heyman believed Gordon was driven by ego, preferring to be a big fish in a small pond.

Throughout 1997 Heyman was also repeatedly shooting down Gordons repeated requests to expand his ECW commissioner role into a more prominent character. Gordon wanted either to be The Sandman's manager or work as a manager of two females. Gordons idea was that the trio would be called Mr. G and the G-Spots. The G-Spots would be two women, named Peaches and Cream. Heyman shot down both ideas more than once. He wanted Gordon to remain as commissioner, and from all appearances, Gordon could have held that role indefinitely if not for what came next.

POWER STRUGGLE

The big companies had ways to keep their talent in place. More than one person close to the wrestlers said Vince McMahon had friends in the Tampa-area real-estate market. When wrestlers signed with the WWF, McMahon would put them in touch with those realtors, who would often

sell wrestlers homes in the area. With the wrestlers now locked into making house payments, they could not afford to leave or defy the boss and risk getting fired. Bills have a way of making even the most ornery wrestlers compliant.

Heyman had no such contacts, and ECW was anything but the home of high-dollar, long-term guaranteed contracts. In 1997, Gordon tried to take advantage of that fact by attempting a coup that would have devastated ECW.

In 1997 Gordon was trying to sell WCW's Terry Taylor on the idea of Gordon coming to work for WCW, doing an "ECW invasion," similar to the New World Order concept as a force of wrestlers invading WCW. Taylor loved the idea and asked Gordon what Heyman thought.

In one of the most telling moments of the *Forever Hardcore* documentary DVD that came out in 2004, Taylor said that Gordon told him that Heyman could not know what was going on under any circumstances.

Heyman's discovery of Gordon's plan was the end of not only the plan, but of Tod Gordon in ECW.

The group Gordon was looking to take was to be The Sandman, Perry Saturn, and Bill Alphonso. Gordons crucial mistake was including two men who proved more loyal to Heyman than Gordon had anticipated. Not long after Sabu and Rob Van Dam were approached about Gordons plan, both of them, independent of one another, called Heyman to tell him what was happening.

Sabu evidently smelled a rat, while Van Dam simply seemed to be happy with his spot as a top villain who was on his way to becoming ECW's top babyface in an environment where he would not have to tone down his act or his style. He also likely remembered that Heyman had stood up for him in the face of Vince McMahon, the most powerful wrestling promoter in the country. Displays of loyalty to that degree were rare in wrestling, and Van Dam reciprocated.

Heyman received a couple of other calls from wrestlers who seemed eager to flip on Gordon, which gave him all the proof he needed.

A few days later, Sabu got a telephone call. It was Heyman, who informed Sabu that he was on speaker and that Sabu did "not want to know" who was in the room with Heyman. According to various accounts that audience consisted of Heyman, Dreamer, Taz, and Buh Buh Ray Dudley, among others.

Heyman asked who approached Sabu.

Sabu replied, “Tod Gordon.”

And who was Gordon talking to in WCW?

“Terry Taylor.”

Heyman then called Van Dam with his audience of wrestlers still intact. Van Dam gave the exact same answers. Some still did not want to believe Gordon was planning to sell ECW down the river, but the next bit of evidence left no room for doubt.

Heyman reportedly knew people who worked in computer security, and with their help, he hacked into Gordons voice pager. Heyman and the assembled wrestlers listened to the messages together. The first message was from Gordons wife, but the second was from Terry Taylor, wanting to talk about an updated list of talent for the invasion angle.

The stunning series of phone calls continued with a call to Taylor, who seemed surprised to hear from Heyman. Heyman told Taylor that some of the talent he was looking to bring into WCW was under contract; thus Taylor was risking expensive litigation. Heyman also reportedly told Taylor that although he might not be in a position to threaten him now, he was a big fish in a small pond while Taylor was a small fish in a big shark-infested pond. Someday, Heyman said, Taylor could find himself having to deal with Heyman, and whether that would be pleasant depended on what Taylor did at this moment.

Taylor cancelled the invasion plans, and the ECW camp had some decisions of its own to make. The decision was, Gordon was out of the company he had founded. Also gone was Bill Alphonso, while The Sandman would have to sign a contract to stay. Saturn ended up in WCW anyway. Raven, after he arrived in the rival league, helped his friend relocate.

THE LOSING END

On September 20, 1997, shortly before the start of that night’s ECW Arena show, Heyman told Alphonso that Gordon was gone and that Alphonso would be as well, following his match that night.

The match was Van Dam and Alphonso versus Dreamer and Beulah. The two full-time wrestlers took a bump that put them out of the match early, leaving Beulah to face off against Alphonso. Their match was supposed to be Alphonso getting thrashed as a blowoff for his character. Then, a funny thing happened: Alphonso put in the performance of his lifetime. Beulah pounded him from pillar to post, as the cliché goes, and "Fonzie" bladed himself early. Within minutes, he was a blood-soaked mess and taking bumps the likes of which no one had *ever* seen him take before. When the match was over, Alphonso had been savaged, bloodied, and battered. He had also saved his job. How could Heyman justify firing a man who had just bled half to death for him?

As for Gordon, he and Heyman talked about their respective positions and concocted the story that would allow Gordon to leave with some dignity as far as the public was concerned.

Heyman refused to speak negatively about Gordon even years later.

In the 1998 America Online chat with fans, Heyman wrote, "What am I supposed to do here? Knock a man that gave me the job that I have today? Criticize a man that has been my friend for over five years? Say something bad about a man who, when he needed a booker, didn't turn to Terry Funk, and didn't turn to Kevin Sullivan, but turned to this unproven commodity, this wild card, that everyone told him was not ready to be the booker yet? I'm sorry if it disappoints people, I'm sorry if it goes against my F you and F the world attitude. But for me to say anything, ANYTHING, ANYTHING that is not beyond flattering about Tod Gordon, would have to be prefaced by a five-hour discussion of how great a man Tod Gordon was and is."

And those sentiments could have very well been genuine. Privately, Gordon and Heyman maintained a relationship even after Gordon's departure from the company he had founded.

"The funny thing about it was I know he and Paul stayed in good touch even after that," Bob Artese said. "It obviously wasn't too bitter or touchy a situation, because they talked back and forth afterward. Tod still was privy to what was going on in ECW."

But Gordon was not as amicable. As late as 2005, he was telling friends he had been screwed out of the company he had founded, that Heyman did not have controlling interest, although the change in who

issued the paychecks starting in 1995 seems to make that claim suspect at the very least.

Most of the wrestlers (and everyone else associated with ECW) never got the straight scoop about why Gordon was suddenly gone.

“I’ve heard several different stories, and I don’t even care to speculate about it,” Axl Rotten said. “I really didn’t care as long as Tod was OK. Leaving seemed to be his idea.”

WORKING OUT DIFFERENCES

In a way, Gordon’s departure also seemed to be the culmination of friction between ECW’s two major contingents—the “New York” faction and the Philadelphia crew. Within ECW, there had long been a sense of rivalry between Paul Heyman and his fellow New Yorkers (think Taz) and Gordons Philadelphia people (such as The Sandman). The cliques generated some legitimate animosity between the wrestlers and even other members of the promotion, although they generally were not as divisive as the cliques in the WWF and WCW.

“Especially when Paul took over and Tod got out, I always felt I wasn’t welcome in the locker room as far as Paul was concerned,” said ring announcer Bob Artese. “Now that was never true with the wrestlers. I had the best relationship with the wrestlers, no matter where they were from, but I got the feeling that with Paul, there was a sense that I was only there because of Tod. It even felt the same when I did the *One Night Stand show* in June [of 2005], which Paul was basically running. It was still a little uncomfortable there, but again, not with the wrestlers. I had a ball with the workers.”

Axl Rotten said that the climate in ECW changed when Gordon left, and not necessarily for the better.

“Tod was one of the guys we could go up to when we needed to get a straight answer about something. Paul never would give a straight answer about anything, whether he did or didn’t mean to. I really don’t think he knew how to. He’d say, ‘Well, let me explain it to you this way,’ and then give you some analogy. If you came to him with a problem, he’d spin it.

But now, I look back, and Paul wasn't 100 percent the tyrant he has been made out to be. And it never became much of an issue, because after Tod was gone, business was on and running all over the country, so we were happy we were all going over and working all over."

Gordon had not been happy with ECW's expansion and its effects, according to several people close to both him and Heyman. Gordon disagreed with Heymans belief that the only way for ECW to survive was to grow and become a national power that could afford to pay salaries that would keep the company from constantly having its top stars cherry-picked by the two major powers.

Gordon was also not happy with the way Heyman handled ECW's business, as Heyman shouldered more responsibility. With Heyman, details fell through cracks more than once. Wrestlers repeatedly found themselves without travel arrangements until the last minute.

Tracy Smothers said many of the wrestlers got no more of an explanation for Gordons departure than what television viewers received.

"All I knew was they had a falling out, and I didn't ask what it was about," Smothers said. "I guess it worked out between them, but everybody hated it, because everybody liked Tod. I liked Paul, too, though. I'd known Paul since 1987. He was always a hustler, always on that phone, always thinking of something."

Bob Artese said, "To this day, as close as I still am to Tod, I have never known why he left. It was just a sudden thing no one ever saw coming. One week, he was there; the next, he wasn't."

But Gordon's absence did not keep ECW from rolling along. Heyman was getting new acts over, including WWF exile Al Snow, who had recently flamed out as Leif Cassidy of the New Rockers. Snow started talking to a mannequin's head and turned his real frustration at not getting a real shot into the madness of his new character.

The deal that brought Al Snow to ECW had the WWF paying his salary and transportation expenses. It was ECW's job to equip him with a gimmick he could take back to the WWF, and ECW got a piece of talent for a few months at no cost.

HIGH TIMES IN ECW

But one thing that did carry a cost was the punishing, physical style. More than one locker-room observer noted that painkiller use was prevalent, and in some cases, use became abuse.

In fairness, some of the wrestlers seemed to know enough about what they were doing to keep from suffering too much from the effects of their substance of choice.

Rob Van Dam, who was even featured once in an issue of pro-marijuana *High Times* magazine, was known as the foremost authority on marijuana—he knew how to grow it, how to cultivate it, and how to prepare it. More than once, announcer Joey Styles made a sideways reference to Van Dam's proclivities, and Van Dam himself even adopted the catchphrase "RVD 4:20 says I just smoked your ass," an off-shoot of the WWF's "Austin 3:16" takeoff on the most famous of biblical verses.

Years later, on an episode of the WWF's flagship show *Raw*, Heyman himself was commentating when Van Dam launched himself off of the top rope, delivering his spectacular frog splash onto a hapless foe.

As the man known to his fans as RVD took flight, Heyman exclaimed, "Nobody gets any higher than Rob Van Dam!"

Others could not handle their habits as well. Louis "Spicolli" Mucciolo was a solid, hard-working, if unspectacular, wrestler who caught the WWF's eye at the November 1994 *When Worlds Collide Lucha Libre* pay-per-view. He didn't take long to wash out of the WWF and came to ECW in 1996, seemingly determined to prove himself. Often, he ended up as addled as his *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* namesake.

"Spicolli was such a nice guy; all he wanted was to fit in," Laible said.

Others said Spicolli's problems came back to haunt him more than once in embarrassing fashion. Once, Heyman and a couple of other ECW people got to a Massachusetts hotel and asked if any of the other wrestlers had yet arrived. The clerk replied that Spicolli had, but that he had passed out in the lobby and had to be helped to his room.

Spicolli ended up in WCW, where by 1998 the plan was to turn him into a spastic comedy character along the lines of deceased movie actor Chris Farley. Spiccoli ended up imitating Farley a little too well.

In February 1998, Spicolli died of an enlarged heart five days after his 27th birthday. By that point, friends said, he had built up enough of a tolerance that he was taking two dozen or more somas a day.

He was not the only one. ECW's physically punishing style left locker rooms often looking like a triage in a combat arena, and many of the stars were relieving their pains with pharmaceuticals.

One person who spent time behind the scenes in ECW said many of the wrestlers "were taking somas like candy," doping themselves up to the point that a few of them occasionally had to be spoon-fed.

Bob Artese said that while many in the company ended up overusing drugs at one point or another, they should not be remembered as criminals.

"That's probably the one thing that bothers me that I hear, in general, the drugs in wrestling," Artese said. "From watching what went on in ECW, when you talk about drugs there, you're not talking about your hard street drugs. It was medical stuff, and they took it because the guys were so beaten up from show to show. These were not cocaine users; they were not shooting up. They used pills, and one guy would give some to another wrestler who was hurting. I've seen somebody taking a pill without knowing what he was taking. I mean these guys were laying on the floor just in agony.

"Those guys worked their asses off, and it always bothered me when someone would say, 'They're not hurt. That stuffs fake.' I would tell people, It's predetermined,' but no one could look at the ECW locker room after an event and tell me it was fake. The amazing thing was they would always be talking about what they could do to go above and beyond what they had done that night."

Drug problems also cost ECW one of its most popular tag teams.

The Pitbulls had been ECW through and through right from the start to the extent that their ring entrance music was White Zombie's *Thunderkiss '65*, the same song that served as the opening theme for the ECW television show.

In January 1995, police in Medford Lakes, New Jersey, nabbed a man whose identity federal officials would not disclose for possession of about a pound of marijuana. In exchange for immunity, he told federal agents he would turn over his suppliers. Those suppliers were Anthony Durante and Gary Wolfe, better known to ECW fans as Pitbulls 1 and 2.

"They had been supplying the cooperating witness for about a year," said David Fritchey, the assistant U.S. attorney who prosecuted the Pitbulls case. "In addition to marijuana, he had also bought steroids, both for personal use and to sell to his bodybuilder friends."

On February 27, 1995, the cooperating witness called Wolfe to discuss the availability of steroids and pot. Wolfe agreed to sell the man about five pounds of what Fritchey called “low-grade marijuana.”

On March 1, 1995, he called Wolfe again to set up the meeting. Wolfe told him to meet Durante and him at a tattoo parlor on Ninth Street in Philadelphia. From there, they went to Durante’s home, where they made the exchange—$6,000 for the marijuana. The steroids, the informant took on consignment. The deal was he would pay Wolfe and Durante as he sold the vials to weightlifters.

In reality, the man turned the drugs over to federal agents.

Over the next few weeks, the witness had more conversations with the two wrestlers. They talked about such varied topics as when Durante and Wolfe could get their steroid money, ways to keep marijuana fresh, and possible future deals for cocaine and amphetamines. All the conversations went down on tape.

Durante and Wolfe were indicted on drug charges on June 25, 1997. They reached an agreement.

“They pleaded guilty and agreed to cooperate in turning in their suppliers,” Fritchey said.

The two men avoided federal prison, but as soon as the convictions became official, Heyman fired them from ECW.

The drug bust also kept The Pitbulls from getting a shot with WCW, where they had been trying to get work as the case wound down.

In an America Online chat with fans, conducted April 29, 1998, Heyman wrote, “I like Anthony and Gary. They are friends of mine. And I would give them nothing but the highest letter of recommendation to any prospective employer.”

Still, outside of a couple of isolated shots in which they put over new stars, their ECW days were over.

More than one person close to the company said drug problems were not limited to two or three performers and were nothing new. One person described the ECW dressing room as “loaded with cocaine. I’ve never seen a dressing room that was *that* loaded.”

Tracy Smothers said he did not know who took what drugs and always made it a point never to find out, because he believed in respecting his peers by minding his own business.

“You’ve seen the guys in the business who aren’t with us no more,” he said. “And it ain’t just wrestling; it’s anything where there’s a lot of physical punishment involved. Even now, I’m gone 20 to 25 days a month, working all over the place. Wrestlers are in pain, as we travel all over God’s creation. These guys are playing hurt, too. We put braces on our hurt knees, and we go out there. If we didn’t work hurt, we wouldn’t be working at all.”

Smothers did say he was very conscious of the dangers of painkilling drugs.

“I have been prescribed painkillers before, and I don’t like taking them, but if I absolutely have to, I will. I will always take one with an aspirin or something to balance it out. But you see what you see in those matches. If a guy’s going to jump off a balcony, hell I’d be hitting something, after that. I don’t know who took what, and I don’t want to know. But we all knew we were going to be in some pain. Look at New Jack, not that I’m saying New Jack takes anything, but when he does one of those big high dives, New Jack’s scared, even as tough as he is. You can see it in his *eyes*. And who wouldn’t be? You’re just hoping you land OK, and what about the guy on the table, the one you’re landing on? That would scare the hell out of me.”

ITALIAN CHEESE

With all the turmoil and turnover, one ECW act continued to plug along. The Full Blooded Italians started in early 1996, with African-American wrestler J.T. Smith (who had been with ECW almost since the beginning) joining forces with the legitimately Italian-American James “Little Guido” Maritato. Smiths inclusion came from a very real moment during a match, when his foot caught the rope as he tried to dive out of the ring. He cracked his head on the concrete arena floor. The ECW fans showed their compassion by chanting, “You fucked up!” at Smith.

The injury turned into a gimmick, because the story was that Smith became so deranged that he legitimately thought he was Italian.

The faction was often played for laughs, but there was nothing funny about Little Guido’s athletic background. Behind his comedic persona,

Maritato was a man with impressive amateur wrestling credentials in his native New York, where he also played noseguard for his high school football team. He had been trained by Billy Robinson, the British wrestler who was known as one of the toughest of wrestlings shooters.

Maritato had also worked for Japans UWF-I group, which specialized in a stiffer, more brutal in-ring style that was designed to appear as legitimate competition to the more sophisticated Japanese fans.

“He was a tough kid, and unlike us, he was Italian all the way,” said Tracy Smothers, a frequent tag partner of Little Guido’s in ECW. “I was impressed with him from the first time I saw him. He could work a shoot as well as anyone.”

But Smothers said Guido could work, too.

“When we were teaming, Guido would start the match and do some unbelievable wrestling,” Smothers said. “He’s a great example of what people don’t know about ECW. When you see an ECW pay-per-view, there are a lot of great matches and great workers. I mean it was not just tables and barbed wire. It wasn’t all about that. Paul wouldn’t have every match doing that. You have to get the people ready for it. It’s like a restaurant. People like all different kinds of food, so the bigger a menu you have, the more you’re going to appeal to people. By the time the main event was coming out, they’d be ready.”

Guido had actually worked in ECW during the company’s earliest days, both as a masked ninja and as preliminary wrestler Damien Stone.

When J.T. Smith left the company, Heyman brought in Tommy Rich and Tracy Smothers to play the obviously not Italian members of the Full Blooded Italians. Both men were superstars in the Southern United States with Rich having a very brief stint as NWA world champion back when that meant something.

Chris Candido and Shane Douglas recommended Smothers to Heyman, and for a short period, Smothers was working for ECW and WWF, wrestling afternoon shows for McMahon as Freddie Joe Floyd before transforming into a Full Blooded Italian at night in ECW.

“It was actually my second match there about three weeks after my first. I had gone to Kuwait on a WWF tour and worked New Haven the same day. Then I went down for ECW. Paul didn’t have a lineup when I got there. I went to Sabu and asked him if he knew who I was working with.”

As it turned out, Heyman had not given much thought to the matter.

“That was just Paul,” Smothers said. “He would put things together on the fly and do it pretty well. He’d have his booking plan on a napkin in his pocket or whatever. They had put Tommy Rich with Guido as the FBI the month before, and they asked me if I’d like to do it. I had fun with the chin gesture and all the mannerisms, and the idea of a redneck Italian was kind of funny. In this business, whatever card they deal you, you go with it. If you’re in something that’s their idea, you know you’ve got a job. Some guys know that, but some forget it. I also wanted to be with Guido, to teach him what I could about working the crowd.”

Although Smothers spent the bulk of his career as a babyface, he found being a heel came naturally.

“When Steve [Armstrong] and I were the Southern Boys tag team, we went down to Mexico as heels,” he said. “We wore Confederate flag masks and everything. They hated us! The truth is it’s a lot easier to make people hate you than like you. Being a heel gives you a chance to get all your frustrations out.”

ON THE ROAD ECW-STYLE

Smothers and Rich played their roles to the hilt and were still as wild away from the ring as they were funny inside of it. Many an ECW spectator and wrestler had stories of the two men blasting Hank Williams Jr. in the pickup truck (with a Confederate flag affixed to it) they rode to matches in Philadelphia, Boston, and other Northeast strongholds. Once they got near the arena for the night, they would go into their gimmicks, screaming and cursing at passersby, seemingly at random.

Many of the wrestlers developed reputations for rowdiness in and out of the ring, and ECW performers found themselves thrown out of more than one hotel. Many of the guys traveled economically, sometimes packing 15 into a single hotel room.

Two of ECW’s more prominent performers figured out another way to save money while on the road. They would stage a robbery in their hotel room and get comped for the room. They tossed the beds and then told the people they kept their wallets under the mattresses, according to witnesses.

On some nights, a *ring rat* (a female who frequents the matches in hopes of going home with a wrestler, the industry's equivalent of rock band groupies) would accompany numerous performers back to their hotel, where they would take turns with her.

But the hardcore heroes had their softer side, too.

"When Princess Diana died in 1997, here were all these castoffs, crazies, and thugs, sitting packed in a hotel room, watching TV and all respectful and quiet as they were watching the funeral," Laible said.

Security man Stu Kaplan said his introduction to Tommy Rich was memorable.

"I'd had a security shirt made, and I had a couple of police patches, so I put those on there to make it look legit," he said. "I walked into the dressing room with my shirt that I had picked up from the dry cleaners. Well, this was Tommys first time in Boston. When I walked in, he was talking with Tracy, and he just froze. He said, 'Five-O, man.' A couple of the guys in the locker room laughed, and I said, 'No, I work for you guys.'"

Rich joined the laughing and told Kaplan, "That shirt's getting ripped off tonight, buddy."

Kaplan said Rich was joking around, but Kaplan still made it a point not to be visible in the arena when Rich and Smothers had their match that night.

"It was a nice shirt," he said.

CASUAL ATTIRE

Nice shirts were also starting to catch on with ECW fans. Shirts bearing images of wrestlers, logos, and such slogans as "Politically incorrect and damn proud of it" became favorites among the regular crowd. It helped that the shirts did not have the same cartoonish appearance most wrestling apparel carried. ECW shirts looked like the kind of apparel sold at hard rock concerts.

And they were all done in-house. ECW might never have had the budget to hire a crack event staff, but the loyalty the company inspired helped defray some of the costs a wrestling promotion normally incurred.

Heyman was a one-man management team in ECW, handling almost all aspects of business and booking. As Tod Gordon had feared, things were falling through the cracks, but many of the wrestlers contributed to the running of the company.

The list of people who praise Heyman's booking skills is about as long as the list of people quick to knock the way he ran the business side of ECW.

"ECW could have lasted, if there had been a more formally business-minded atmosphere," Don Laible said. "Tommy [Dreamer] took care of just about everything—shirts, tapes. But Paul would walk around with the T-shirt money in his pants, and I mean a big wad of cash that he just stuck in his pocket. There was no really formal office atmosphere."

Dreamer also contributed booking ideas, including a comedy bit that was remembered even years later at the ECW Arena—the in-ring dance-off between The Blue Meanie and Tracy Smothers.

The two men were in a match when Smothers challenged Meanie. Smothers went first, scooting to the strains of the version of "Stayin Alive" that was his entrance music. The Meanie followed, and the bloodthirsty crowd of the ECW Arena exploded into laughter at the sight of the two grapplers trying to get down.

Tommy Dreamer handled merchandise tables. Taz designed T-shirts. Stevie Richards handled phone orders. Local fans set up the ring and took tickets. The WWF and WCW might have been major financial players, but ECW felt like a family affair to those who stayed part of it.

The "family" concept was one that more than one wrestling promoter has tried to use to foster loyalty from his performers, but in ECW, it seemed to be more than just lip service.

Most buildings in which ECW ran shows had single dressing rooms in which the performers changed clothes, and in most towns, the layout was the same—clusters of wrestlers around the room, with Paul Heyman sitting at a table in the middle of the room. At ECW Arena and pay-per-view shows, most of the wrestlers huddled around monitors, watching the matches. When two wrestlers came back to the dressing room, they were often greeted with praise for their matches and ideas from veterans on how they could build on spots in that match next time. This approach was starkly different than the backstage environment of WCW, wherein some of the "big stars" had their own dressing rooms and never even communicated

with the midcard and preliminary wrestlers, all of whom shared one or two locker rooms.

"The biggest contributor to what made ECW what it was was that we all got along," Shane Douglas said. "Later on, there would be cliques like the drug guys would sit in one part of the dressing room, the old-school guys in another, but Paul, when he saw that, would make a conscious effort to pull us all together."

Richard said ECW also gave its local promoters more freedom than the "Big Two" did.

"Paul gave me carte blanche, and the wrestlers were just phenomenal, a great bunch of guys," Richard said. "Paul E. was a genius with what he did, and he surrounded himself with people who would make him look good, people who believed in the product. But in the back of my mind, there was always the money issue."

Richard and partner Mike Benansky were among the most aggressive local promoters in the country, and the proof was in the crowds they drew, which were among the strongest of any ECW shows.

"We probably pushed that promotion better than anyone ever had," Richard said. "We even got TicketMaster to sell ECW tickets for the first time. TicketMaster usually would not take any event where there were less than 1,000 tickets, but they started selling tickets to our shows. ECW started showing up in the monthly brochures TicketMaster put out. I mean, every month, there was a full page of publicity for ECW.

"We even bought commercials on *Raw* and *Nitro*. I had one cable guy who bought all my time for me. Promoting those shows was like a dream position, because you couldn't miss with the product."

CHAPTER 16

THE WHOLE F’N’ SHOW

“It doesn’t make you bad losing to Rob Van Dam; it just makes you like everybody else.”

–ROB VAN DAM

WHILE ECW SWAM ALONG, the two biggest fish in the wrestling pond were at war with each other, and both WCW and the WWF had repeatedly proven their willingness to shade the line between wrestling and reality, a line ECW had been trampling over for years.

That blur came back to haunt ECW on an October 30, 1997, show in Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania. Two fans threw punches at John “Balls Mahoney” Rechner, and a fracas ensued, in which five fans ended up facing various charges, including assault, disorderly conduct, and harassment. WCW had recently done an angle with a “fan” coming out of the stands to attack a wrestler.

An ECW Halloween 1997 show in the WWF’s hometown of Stamford, Connecticut, was a little more pleasant. ECW’s wrestlers made the most of the date and the site of the show, which drew 1,000 fans, by showing the fans the awful gimmicks they’d had in the WWF. Al Snow came out dressed as Avatar, the failed martial-arts character he once had been in the WWF, heel-on-the-rise Peter “Justin Credible” Polaco came out in the Aldo Montoya costume from his WWF days, and Shane Douglas reprised his Dean Douglas evil schoolteacher character that had been McMahons brainchild. Another new arrival, Jerry Lynn, put on the “Mr. J.L.” mask that he had worn in WCW.

The show’s main event saw Rob Van Dam, still in his WWF-defender role, lose a flag match to Tommy Dreamer. Under the stipulations of the match, Dreamer unfurled an ECW banner, declaring Stamford to be “ECW country.”

(Soon after the Stamford show came one of the most famous matches in wrestling history, and a blend of wrestling storylines and backstage maneuverings at a level that even ECW never touched. Longtime WWF standard-bearer Bret Hart was on his way to WCW and had agreed to lose

the WWF title he held under any other circumstances but that night at that show to Shawn Michaels. However, Michaels beat Hart for the title at *Survivor Series 1997* in Montreal when McMahon, without telling Hart, changed the finish of the match, which was originally set to be Hart winning by disqualification after Michaels' cronies Hunter Heart Helmsley and Chyna interfered. McMahon fashioned his "evil boss" character that was so instrumental in Steve Austins incredible success based on the reaction to actions at Montreal.)

Van Dam got the desired boos in that match, but from town to town, fan response to him was becoming increasingly positive.

HIGH-FLYING FOES

In the early 1990s Jerry Lynn had helped usher in the high-flying era that ECW later made the most of in independent feuds with Sean "The Lightning Kid" Waltman and Sabu. Still, he did not think he would end up wrestling there.

"The funny thing was when I was in WCW, I watched ECW, but I always swore I never would subject myself to that," Lynn said.

Lynns ECW offer actually came after a tryout match for the WWF in 1997.

"I had my tryout in the WWF with Taka [Michinoku], and Paul E. saw it and had Chris Candido ask me if I wanted to come in," Lynn said.

The two sides agreed on money and scheduling, but Lynn had one more thing to address before he would join the company.

"I said, 'I will not have some idiot hitting me in the head with a frying pan,'" he said.

Working in WCW as the masked "Mr. J.L." had been a low point in Lynn's career, and his time in ECW would be the other end of the spectrum —the most fun he ever had as a wrestler.

"When I was in WCW, I wanted to quit the wrestling business altogether," he said. "It was like they knew how to take all the fun out of the business."

PAIN IS PART OF THE GAME

The end of November brought a crowd that shattered all ECW records —4,634 packed the Golden Dome in Monaca, Pennsylvania, (the city that also held ECW's first crowd of 2,000) for the pay-per-view Heyman had promised the town's fans, *November to Remember 1997*.

The show was also a painful one for many ECW performers. Tommy Rogers suffered a neck injury; Tommy Dreamer hurt his ankle in his match against Van Dam; The Sandman injured his shoulder, arm, and ribs in a tables-and-ladder match against Sabu; and Shane Douglas exacerbated an existing elbow injury in his title win over former Triple Threat stablemate Bam Bam Bigelow.

Injuries would continue to plague ECW stars over the next few nights. At a December 5, 1997, show in Waltham, Massachusetts, Doug Furnas and Phil LaFon won the tag titles from the Dudleys. Furnas and LaFon comprised a well-regarded team that had made its mark in Japan before a fairly unexceptional run in the WWF. In Waltham, they played WWF emissaries, and for one night the crowd-inciting Dudleys were crowd favorites. The title change was the kind of "make-good" Heyman liked to give fans whenever there was a substitution. In this case, the makeshift "Gangstanators" team of Kronus and New Jack needed replacing when Kronus suffered an injury at the previous night's show in Revere.

The Waltham show also featured an injury to Sabu that would have been debilitating to a mere mortal. Sabu missed his triple-jump moonsault and busted his jaw on a table leg. His remedy? He taped his jaw shut for the next night's show at the ECW Arena.

And the churning of new talent continued. At the first ECW Arena show of 1998, on January 10, The Great Sasuke made his last ECW appearance, putting over Justin Credible in more ways than one. The match was Credible's second big win over Sasuke, and the storyline of the match was that he worked over the Japanese flier's knee as a way to credit him with breaking Sasuke's leg. Sasuke was legitimately heading in for knee surgery, and Heyman figured out a way to credit his up-and-comer with crippling the international star.

Credible was a colorful preliminary wrestler in the WWF, as the masked "Portuguese Man of War" Aldo Montoya, but his only purpose seemed to be to put others over. Upon his arrival in ECW, Heyman gave him his pun-tastic name and arrogant persona. That character was light years away from the humble, pleasant man P.J. Polaco was behind the scenes, but he thrived in the role.

Jerry Lynns first major feud in ECW was against Justin Credible, whose heel work made it apparent that the WWF had missed a considerable talent.

"Justin was a great heel and a lot of fun to work with. He and I would come up with ideas to make our matches more exciting, but every time we asked permission to do something different, we got shot down, and then, half the time, we'd see someone else doing the very thing we'd suggested," Lynn said. "Finally, when we had our big best-of-three-falls match at the ECW Arena, I told Justin, 'We're not asking permission to do anything. We're just going to do what we can do.'"

The two of them went out and put on a show-stealing performance. Lynn said the locker room was a mix of emotions when they returned.

"When we came back, a lot of the guys were giving us an ovation, although I could tell there were certain guys who were not happy they had to follow that match," Lynn said. "That was never something I worried about. I always just wanted to have a match that the crowd could get into. I don't get out there to have the quote, unquote, 'best match on the show.'"

THE BOTTOM-LINE BLUES

As 1997 drew to a close, morale was up, as wrestlers were getting their *Hardcore Heaven* pay-per-view checks, which were more sizable than the *Barely Legal* ones had been.

And a new year brought more new stops to the ECW schedule. The company's debut in Indianapolis on January 4, 1998, drew a 1,000-fan sellout.

Still, when it came to black ink, ECW was not producing much of it even as it allegedly continually broke company records. In March, tickets

went on sale for ECW's May 3 *Wrestlepalooza* show in Marietta, Georgia, with 794 tickets (good for $34,000 in receipts) sold the first day they were available. Also in March, Waltham and Revere drew sellouts, while a Queens, New York, show on March 13 drew an overflow crowd of 1,000 fans. The next night in Poughkeepsie drew 1,600 fans, but they had to do without seeing The Sandman in action—state athletic commissioners would not let him wrestle because he had high blood pressure. Even in August 1998, ECW was drawing increasingly strong crowds—witness the 2,800 who attended an August 13, 1998, show in Buffalo.

By 1998, Paul Richard said, business was strong in New England, but the Spanish-language channel airing ECW (in English) in the Boston area was continually having problems getting the show tapes on time.

"We were selling shows out, with 1,000 to 1,500 every time, but I was constantly getting calls from the TV station, because they weren't getting the tapes," Richard said. "There were so many nights Paul would have the TV show driven from New York to Boston, for Mike to deliver, but it would be a day late. The policy of the station was if a tape was not there the day before so they could look at it and make sure there weren't any issues with it airing, the show doesn't get aired. One time, Paul flew it down here on a plane, and my partner Mike picked it up at the airport. If the station weren't so into what we were doing, they wouldn't have aired it."

What Heyman and company presented as ECW's 15th consecutive sellout came March 21, 1998, at the ECW Arena. However, others close to Heyman said the ECW Arena almost never sold out, and that many of the tickets for full houses in the former bingo hall were *paper*, wrestlespeak for free tickets given away to fill up an arena.

But ECW kept plugging along, although the signals were mixed. One week in October 1998 was the company's biggest money week ever strictly in terms of live attendance—3,500 fans paid $71,000 in Buffalo, 3,374 paid $62,000 in Pittsburgh, 2,371 paid $42,000 in Cleveland, and an Altoona show drew 1,100 fans paying $24,000 on consecutive nights. That stint also brought in $83,000 in merchandise sales.

However, by 1998, wrestling companies were no longer living and dying by the live gates as they had in decades past. The real money was in television revenues and pay-per-view. ECW's pay-per-views were drawing just shy of 100,000 buys at best. Most hovered closer to 50,000 to 60,000. For the sake of perspective, 50,000 would be one-sixth to a quarter of what

WCW and WWF shows were doing in 1997 and 1998. And Heyman was starting to complain that the pay-per-view revenues were taking a long time to reach ECW.

RVD TAKES OFF

Regardless of whether they all paid to be there, a full house of fans saw Al Snow, at the peak of his "head" gimmicks popularity, pinning an increasingly popular Rob Van Dam.

The push to break out Van Dam on his own started soon after, with Heyman teasing a storyline split between Van Dam and tag partner Sabu.

On April 4, 1998, about a week after the start of the breakup angle, Van Dam scored the upset that launched him into the top tier of ECW stars. The match was a TV title shot at champ Bam Bam Bigelow, and the storyline idea was that Van Dam would soften up Bigelow for his upcoming match against Sabu.

Bigelow dominated early, throwing Van Dam over the guardrail and into the third row. Van Dam ended up coming back, at one point hitting an incredible somersault flip, jumping from the ring over the top rope and onto Bigelow, who was standing in the crowd.

The match ended when Sabu came to the ring and attacked Bigelow, ending with a chair in Bigelow's hands. Van Dam kicked the chair into his face (a move he called the "Van Daminator") and got the pin.

Van Dam and Sabu rode on as the tag champs who couldn't stand each other. At the *Heat Wave 1998* pay-per-view, they defeated the team of Hayabusa and Jinsei Shinzaki. Shinzaki had been known as Hakushi in the WWF a couple of years earlier.

Van Dam regularly performed spectacular aerial moves, getting more height and distance than anyone. As a cocky heel, he had taken to calling himself "The Whole Fuckin Show," making him more than just the best thing on the show. Fans picked up on it and chanted it regularly during his matches. Van Dam had truly arrived as a top star, and ECW had room for one, as longtime ECW icon The Sandman signed a $200,000 WCW contract on September 8, 1998, the same day the compact disc *ECW:*

Extreme Music was released. The disc featured a dozen songs used as ECW wrestlers' entrance themes—and a barbed-wire-wrapped Sandman on the cover. About a month and a half later, Bam Bam Bigelow followed suit, signing a two-year deal with the Turner Broadcasting-owned company.

The Sandman's stint in WCW was short and not particularly distinguished. He adopted the name Hardcore Hak, taken from the Hak nickname Jim Fullington had for years before his wrestling days.

Van Dam and Sabu would end up opposing each other as often as they teamed over the next few months, but the opponent who had Van Dam's most memorable matches made his first challenge to the TV champ a little more than a month after Van Dam beat Bigelow. He was a smallish but incredibly conditioned wrestler who had made a name for himself years earlier on the independent circuit, but who never seemed to get a real break with a major company. He was the aforementioned Jerry Lynn, and his first match against Van Dam was on May 15, 1998, in Hamburg, Pennsylvania.

That match would begin a sporadic series of bouts that would become perhaps ECW's most fondly remembered rivalry.

"To this day, one of the things people come up and mention to me most is the feud I had with RVD," Lynn said, laughing as he added that he paid a physical price for those memorable matches. "Rob had a reputation for working a little stiff. After our first match, I had blood on my nose, blood on my shoulder, and Al Snow came up to me in the back and said, 'You look like you've been in a war.' I just said, 'It isn't supposed to be like this.'"

DUDLEY-RIFIC

Van Dam picked up steam in 1998, but no one seemed to be carrying as much heat as The Dudleys. Buh Buh Ray had gone from stuttering, smiling oaf to a swearing mountain of rage, and D-Von was as mean and nasty as he had been from day one. Now their entourage included "Big" Dick Dudley, turned heel again, as well as still-silent Sign Guy Dudley (typical sign: "Welcome to Dudley World"), and obnoxious ring announcer Joel Gertner.

At a Staten Island, New York, show in July 1998, the Dudleys' act had fans so hot that one fan threw a beer that hit "Big" Dick, who went over the rail to challenge any fan who wanted to take a swing. Security held fans off, and the Dudleys' match went on as advertised with fans throwing chairs and other sundry items throughout.

Many of the Dudleys' opponents grew weary of the pseudo-family's prematch rantings, because the routine now consisted of both Buh Buh and D-Von cutting promos on the crowd, plus "official Dudley ring announcer" Gertner sharing raunchy poetry and introducing every member of the growing Dudley clan before each match.

"It got kind of boring," Axl Rotten said. "Balls Mahoney and I would be behind that curtain, waiting and waiting to come out while they were introducing everyone under the sun."

But there was nothing boring about the violent intensity of the Dudleys' matches. Whether they were pitching Spike Dudley into the audience, power-bombing opponents onto flaming tables, or "breaking the neck" of Beulah, ending her ECW tenure with a Dudley Death Drop, the team exuded a sense of true danger and menace as well as any heels in wrestling.

A HEEL-TO-TOE ECW PERFORMANCE

But ECW's last pay-per-view of 1998, *November to Remember*, drew an ECW-record 5,800 fans to New Orleans' Lakefront Arena, although again its pay-per-view number was nothing to write home about.

The show opened with the return of one of the men who was instrumental in ECW's early development—Terry Funk. By 1998, Funk had proven himself as one of wrestling's most durable and versatile performers—starting in 1965 as a plucky, young babyface and transitioning over time into a crafty, traveling world champion, a maniacal heel, and ultimately an aging gunslinger and Hardcore Legend.

But at 1998's *November to Remember*, Funk would assume one of his most challenging roles—a truly hated heel in ECW. Could the man who

exemplified ECW's spirit in many ways get himself over as a despicable villain to that audience?

Terry Funk was up for the challenge. He came out to interrupt Joey Styles' opening, ranting about the slight he felt by not being picked as Tommy Dreamer's tag partner. Dreamer had been having trouble with Jack Victory, and Funk appeared furious that Dreamer would turn to someone besides him for help.

He ended up cursing at Dreamer and later attacking him, with Dreamer refusing to hit back the man who had been portrayed as his mentor. Unfortunately, the series of matches between Dreamer and Funk never materialized, because Funk ended up hospitalized with hepatitis in early 1999. By the time he recovered, the angle had too much dust on it.

"[Hepatitis] laid me up for about three or four months," Funk said. "It was just miserable. I could do things, but it took all my resilience and stamina from me.

November to Remember also featured another unlikely heel turn when perpetually odds-overcoming underdog Mikey Whipwreck helped Lance Storm overcome his former partner, Chris Candido. Storm and Candido had played the parts of the tag team whose members hated each other—a motif Heyman used more than once.

Whipwreck didn't get to play heel long, as he soon joined The Sandman in WCW, making his debut at WCWs *Uncensored* pay-per-view on March 14, 1999.

FMW import Masato Tanaka made an appearance at *November to Remember*, getting over as one of the toughest guys in ECW history by shaking off chair shots and kicking out of the Dudleys' 3-D finisher before capturing the tag titles from the hated family with partner Balls Mahoney.

Unfortunately, the future of the ECW-FMW deal looked uncertain by the end of the year with Heyman claiming the Japanese company owed ECW thousands of dollars. By early 1999, the deal had completely fallen apart with FMW pulling Tanaka from a string of ECW shows after Bigelow, Chris Candido, and Tammy Sytch no-showed an FMW pay-per-view. Bigelow was out of Heyman's hands, because he had moved on to WCW for a feud with Bill Goldberg. Heyman also felt he had made up for the no-shows by sending Sabu and the One Man Gang as replacements.

PAY-PER-VIEW GURU

In late 1998, ECW employed a new ally—Elizabeth Tutt, the former pay-per-view executive. Heyman hired Tutt as a consultant to handle marketing of ECW pay-per-views to cable companies.

By the time she was working for ECW, Tutt said, issues about content were not as pervasive as they had been just 18 months earlier.

"The WWF had gotten more into that ECW style, and that was when it went from trying to convince people that everything was real to saying it was entertainment," she said. "That changed everyone's perceptions about what wrestling was."

From her office in Colorado, Tutt dealt most with Heyman and Steve Karel, the guy running the business end, when it came time to put together publicity kits for upcoming pay-per-views. She said she liked Heyman, but preferred dealing with Karel.

"Paul was hard to pin down," Tutt said. "With Steve, you could get things done. He understood the business end of it, whereas Paul was completely out of his depth. It was more than he was familiar with."

Karel, a syndicator and bodybuilding guru with experience promoting television packages and events, had been drawn into the company to help Heyman, who was either a longtime friend or his cousin, depending on whom one believes. Karel found himself being asked to handle increasing amounts of administrative duties to the point that he almost became the de facto head of ECW's business side. Once Heyman broke away from Gordon, ECW's corporate identity became HHG Inc., and Karel became an inextricable part of the running of the corporation.

Many people who did business with ECW said they preferred dealing with Karel, who understood business realities to which Heyman appeared to be blind. Many who dealt with both men also said Karel was preferable, because when *he* said something, it actually would come true.

Tutt said many in wrestling had to adjust to the unique demands of the world of pay-per-view. Historically, wrestling had been built on the promotion of non-televised events, and promotions would visit cities in their territories anywhere from once a week to once a month. It was a closed system, and promoters could adjust their programs and matchups,

depending on how performers and angles were getting over. Pay-per-view schedules required promotion that was more far-sighted.

“When you get into pay-per-view, a lot more has to happen, as far as getting promotional spots and advertising out months in advance,” Tutt said. “Its really difficult in wrestling to do well when you don’t know who’s headlining the show three months in advance. I mean with these guys you might not know until two weeks before the show. It’s just the nature of wrestling; you have to go with the flow as far as storylines go.”

Tutt said preparing promotional kits for shows was a matter of taking a calculated risk.

“You may not know what’s going to happen three pay-per-views down the road, but you have an idea who will be featured,” she said. “I would come up with print ads and take the top guys, who seemed like they would be around. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn’t. We just had to wing it.”

CHAPTER 17

TAZ ON TOP

“Beat me, if you can—survive, if I let you!”

–TAZ

AFTER YEARS OF BUILDUP, January 10, 1999, was Taz’s night to ascend to the top of ECW’s heap.

The show was ECW’s first pay-per-view of 1999, *Guilty as Charged*, from Kissimmee, Florida. Taz challenged Shane Douglas for the title and “knocked him out” to win the belt. Heyman had spent years building Taz into someone perceived as the real deal in a fighting situation, and now he was officially ECW’s standard-bearer.

The title change ended up being the straw that would drive Douglas out of ECW for good—not because he was mad about doing a job (Taz and Douglas remained friends even after Douglas left the company), but because he believed the title belt was the closest thing he had to an insurance policy that he would get the thousands of dollars ECW owed him in back pay.

“For months, I had been told that the culmination of the Taz angle was that I was going to win the match,” Douglas said. “That last week was a week where I couldnt get my calls returned. I knew the only way I was going to get my money was if I had the belt for leverage. I guess I could have just no-showed the card, but as good as ECW had been to me, I didn’t want to fuck the fans. The hardest thing I ever did in my career was to walk out there.”

As an aside, this show also featured clear signs of Heyman’s fraying. Both Masato Tanaka (booked even after ECW’s relationship with FMW was on the rocks) and Taka Michinoku were booked but did not appear simply because Heyman never took care of their working visas.

But Taz was still more than the face of the company in the ring. Just as he had designed the ECW T-shirts, Taz used his artistry to create logos and other designs for promotional material. Taz might have been the personification of destruction in the ring, but behind the scenes Peter Serneca was nothing but creative.

“Taz was just great to deal with,” Elizabeth Tutt said. “He was really professional. If I ever called him up and said I needed something from him, I had it immediately. And he was *very* good at it. I mean he was a really good artist. Most of the wrestlers I dealt with were guys like that, who also handled things on the business side, and they were really good guys. These guys who were playing these mean, horrible characters in the ring were not like that at all. Of course, you get them in the ring, and it’s a different story.”

THE ANTI-ECW HERO

But another stars emergence in ECW betrayed a seeming contradiction in the mentality of ECW fans. ECW had, almost since its birth, tailored itself to the so-called smart fans—the fans who read newsletters, looked up news on the Internet, and discussed the inner workings of the industry as best they could. To these fans, Sid Eudy, who wrestled as Sid Vicious, Sid Justice, and (in ECW) simply as Sid, was the antithesis of a hardcore wrestling hero. Sid was a likable country boy who loved to play softball. He was also someone who got opportunity after opportunity in wrestling because of his height (6-foot-9) and his impressive physique, rather than through a penchant for insane stunts or 45-minute marathon matches. He was exactly the kind of wrestler the ECW faithful loved to ridicule when he starred for WCW or the WWF.

But when he made his ECW Arena debut, the place exploded. Sid’s short ECW stint consisted of him doing very short matches and drinking in the adulation of the fans who had scorned him for years.

Backstage Sid pretty much kept to himself and never really became embraced by the ECW family. After only a few appearances, Sid found himself shorted on pay, and he left. He next turned up in WCW, where his active career ended when he suffered a gruesome ankle break during a 2000 pay-per-view.

THE SHORT-LIVED RETURN OF THE PUBLIC ENEMY

The first ECW Arena show of 1999 also saw the return of ECW's original tag-team phenom—The Public Enemy. However, their stint in WCW had seemed to prove nothing so much as Heyman's ability to emphasize strengths and disguise weaknesses. In ECW, The Public Enemy had gotten to be a wild ultra-violent daredevil team. In WCW, the team kept the tables that were central to their gimmick, but found their act toned down significantly and found themselves forced into WCW's more rigid match formula.

Finally, the tag team's contract expired, and Rocco Rock and Johnny Grunge found themselves back in ECW. But Heyman had no interest in reviving them as the world-beating tag team they had been three years earlier. This time around, as far as Heyman was concerned, the sole purpose of The Public Enemy was to put over ECW's new generation of stars, particularly the Dudleys. This did not thrill Rock and Grunge, and they were soon gone again for good. The fact that they had given plenty of notice when leaving in 1996 did not seem to assuage Heymans rancor over a team he saw as his creation going to the enemy.

"It sure seemed like the trust was gone, and the heat was on," Terry Funk said.

Having experienced all they cared to of WCW this time, the two wrestlers tried the WWF waters, only to find their WCW move coming back to haunt them for a second time. The teams decision to pick WCW over the WWF when both companies were courting The Public Enemy in 1995 had apparently left WWF decision-makers with feathers that were still ruffled four years later. Upon their entry into the WWF, The Public Enemy were immediately beaten and humbled repeatedly by the midcard team of Ron "Faarooq" Simmons and John "Bradshaw" Layfield, known collectively as The Acolytes. The lone television match between the two teams appeared to be an actual battle, with Layfield, in particular, stiffing The Public Enemy seemingly every chance he could get.

Could The Public Enemy have found new life as a moneymaking act in the WWF? No one will ever know, because the decision-makers there

showed more interest in humiliating and then firing them than in ever trying to find out.

Ultimately, The Public Enemy, never as marketable as they had been in the mid-1990s, paid a price for leaving the ECW family, which the wrestling crew resembled at its best.

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

But one star was also looking to leave the family. Sabu was considering a WCW offer, even as ECW television was building for his world title match against perennial rival Taz. He ended up not taking it, but his relationship with Heyman was becoming increasingly strained.

With Taz firmly established as ECW's top star, Heyman was turning his attention to building Lance Storm and Justin Credible, collectively known as The Impact Players, into a top heel tandem.

Lance Storm was a trainee of the Hart Brothers Pro Wrestling Camp, in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The school (started as an offshoot of Hart family patriarch Stu's "Dungeon" training room in his house) had produced some of wrestlings top talents and polished many others. Aside from Bret, Owen, and the other wrestling Hart brothers, Calgary also produced Brian Pillman, Chris Benoit, Chris Jericho, and many other top-flight performers. As a heel, Storm reminded fans constantly of his pedigree, saying after every triumph, "That was from Calgary, Alberta, Canada!"

On a January 1999 broadcast, Joey Styles and new color commentator Joel Gertner were calling a Storm match, when Styles said, "Joel, do you know where Lance Storm is from?"

Gertner replied, "Don't we all?"

The Impact Players were so evil that they turned "The Franchise" into a babyface. Douglas teamed with Dreamer to battle The Impact Players around the horn. But Douglas' ECW career was on its last legs, as he (like Sabu) was unhappy about being owed money. Douglas was also not happy about the direction of his character, because "The Franchise" was being pushed aside to build new heels.

Before much longer, Douglas would be heading out of ECW for good. Tired of his paychecks bouncing, Douglas tested the waters and reeled in a six-figure contract from WCW after an absence of a few months from the ring.

“I finally left because I was owed so much money and it wasn’t getting any better,” Douglas said.

Steve Corino, one of the top heels of ECW’s latter days, said he was disappointed at Douglas’ departure, but would later come to understand where Douglas was coming from.

“I was missing some payments, too, but at the time, I was making only about $75 to $100 a week, working a couple of shots a week,” Corino said. “At the time, I also had a full-time job, and that’s where I was making my living, so I was just happy for the opportunity to learn. Believe me, when I was making big money two years later, I was very upset when my checks started bouncing.”

CHECKING OUT

Douglas was not the only one whose ECW checks were coming back “insufficient funds.” Many of the wrestlers were essentially working without pay until Heyman could make good the payments. That would still be an improvement over ECW’s last months, when even the company’s most dedicated talent really would be working for free even if many of them did not know it until months after the bankruptcy filing.

ECW was even bouncing checks for advertising payments and to Atlas Security, whose members kept outright chaos from erupting in the arena more than once. The still-growing crowds ECW was generally drawing did not make up for the costs of drawing those crowds. Attendance was still strong in the New York area, but the price tag for that was $250,000 a year to the MSG Network, the cost of the network airing ECW’s television show. ECW was also spending about $250,000 for each pay-per-view it held.

Heyman took out a $750,000 loan from Quantum Financing in March 1999, against pay-per-view revenues the company had earned but not yet received. Those affected by the bounced checks were glad to have their

money, but the loan was clearly nothing more than a stopgap measure. Pay-per-view revenues were not coming any faster, and the problems repeating seemed unavoidable.

Heyman was also trying to find a business partner who would absorb some of ECW's production costs in return for a small interest in the struggling wrestling company.

In 1999, ECW had another problem, one that had the potential to be even more ruinous than the delays in getting pay-per-view money. The WWF, in particular, had borrowed heavily from ECW's formula of brawling all over the building, dangerous stunts, and more adult content, and Vince McMahons company was having unprecedented success with that formula. The WWF even established a hardcore championship for matches in which falls could count anywhere and in which the motto was, "Anything goes." However, many of those associated with ECW throughout the years thought the WWF missed the boat on what made the hardcore concept work in ECW.

"ECW really was just a strange, wonderful time in this business that will never happen again," Terry Funk said. "These crazy, loony guys caught the imagination of the public across the U.S.A. But *hardcore* wasn't just hitting a guy with a chair or a frying pan. *Hardcore* was stuff that was sold properly; it was those wonderful physical matches that were snug, tight, or whatever you want to call it. Those were just physical matches, and those guys were trying to do their best to make people believe, or at least gain their respect."

But the WWF's vision of hardcore was what most wrestling fans in the United States saw. As ECW got more clearance nationwide on pay-per-view, and especially later, when ECW finally made it to national cable, a broader audience had a chance to see it. Unfortunately, that audience tended not to see ECW as the innovator. Instead, ECW looked to the mainstream audience like a lower-budget version of what the WWF already was offering.

Money problems, particularly bounced checks, were causing friction among wrestlers and alienating some of ECW's most loyal associates.

New England promoter Paul Richard said partner Mike Benansky's and his relationship with Heyman and ECW soured abruptly about two and a half years after they started.

“The famous bounced check was the end of our New England office,” Richard said. “Paul gave us a check for thousands of dollars, and it bounced the first time. I called Paul, and he gave me the same excuse he was starting to give everybody about pay-per-view payments being late. Well, it so happened that money was part of our cost for chair rentals, and it was on Mikes personal credit card, so we were not happy.

“Mike had talked to someone at Pauls bank. I’m not saying there were a lot of problems, but their banks became close. Pauls bank in New York said they’d had 20 checks come in that week, and they all bounced.”

A few days later, at what proved to be Richard’s and Benansky’s last show in Fall River, Massachusetts, Richard had the check in his hand, and he confronted Heyman over the problem, saying he was going to take the check back to the bank and try again to cash it.

“I said, If this check doesn’t clear, it’s done. We’re done.’ He wanted to give us another check, but I knew that one would bounce, too, so I just stormed out.

A few days later, Richard and Benansky got a tip from someone at Heyman’s bank.

“They told us to go right then and put the check in,” Richard said. “We did, and it cleared.”

Heyman had told them to wait a few more days, because he was expecting one of what was surely many big paydays.

“Paul E. would lie so good,” Richard said. “He looked Mike right in the eye and said, 1 promise you if you put that check in on this date, it’ll clear.’ After we got our money, we called Paul E. and told him the New England office was officially closed.”

Heyman was shocked, not that one of his most successful local promotions was calling it quits, but that the check cleared. Richard said Heyman asked the two of them to come to Philadelphia and work something out to stay on, but Richard knew Heyman was in the process of restructuring his deals with other local promoters in ways that did not benefit the locals at all. The local restructuring was a byproduct of Heyman’s efforts to offset some of the losses by lessening the costs of arena shows. One way of doing this was to restructure ECW’s arrangement with local promoters. Previously, ECW paid show promoters a dollar per ticket for the first 1,000 tickets sold. For each ticket sold after the 1,000 mark, promoters received $2. The new deal was for promoters to receive a flat fee

of $500 to $750 for any show that drew 1,700 fans (on average, this was what Heyman saw as the break-even mark for live events). Local promoters could then earn a per-ticket bonus on tickets sold beyond the 1,700 mark. Obviously, many of the local promoters were not happy about the new arrangement.

Richard declined the offer and said goodbye to ECW.

Even before their final falling out, Richard said getting his rightful promoters payment from Heyman was often like squeezing blood from the proverbial turnip.

“There was always an issue with him on how many people there were in the building,” Richard said. “When it came time for the bonus, for drawing a strong house, it was always, ‘Oh, you missed it by 60 tickets.’ It was a constant friggin battle, but we were paid well.”

One person connected to the local promotion end even said Heyman would sometimes understate crowds to avoid paying the bonuses to the local promoters.

“One night, we went up with clickers like baseball umpires use,” the person said. “There were over a thousand when we stopped, and people were still coming. That night, Paul said, ‘Man, I’m sorry; just a few tickets shy of a thousand.’ And it was like getting an audience with the Pope, trying to get in to see Paul E. for your pay after a show. Sometimes, he would hole up somewhere in the arena until 3 a.m.”

Richard and Benansky were not the only ones who had to give up on ECW. The hectic pace and after-hours antics proved too much for Don Laible around the time the New England promoters were calling it quits.

Laible said he finally gave up on the insanity of the wrestling business after one particularly harrowing night in a hotel several months before Richard and Benansky finally packed it in.

“I woke up one morning at 3 a.m. with my phone ringing,” he said. “The person calling asked for Paul, and I figured they were looking for Paul Heyman. I just said Paul wasn’t here and hung up.”

Seconds later, someone “started pounding on the door like Hagrid at the beginning of *Harry Potter.”*

Laible finally answered, fearing the door would end up broken in. On the other side of the door was Balls Mahoney. Laible said Mahoney was furious, because only one channel was working on his hotel room’s television.

“It was the porno channel,” Laible said. “Can you believe it? Only in ECW would this have happened with a professional wrestler mad because all he could get on TV was pornography.”

Laible ended up slipping away after getting sandwiches (with no cheese) for Mahoney, who had been on a rampage of shouting and vomiting in the hotel lobby.

“I was out on Route 1, going to this all-night roast beef place in shorts and sneakers, carrying my wallet. I said, ‘God, if you let me get out of this, I’m going to run and never look back,’” Laible said. “The whole time I was thinking, ‘My God, they’re going to kill me.’”

Minutes after returning with Mahoney’s sandwich, he saw his opening to leave and said he “went and never looked back,” leaving the wrestling business for good.

“In 2000, ECW ran a show in Utica, and Balls was there,” Laible said. “I went with two friends, because I sure as hell wasn’t going alone. Balls was at this meet-and-greet they were having. He looked at me, I looked at him, and nothing was said. I never went to another show.”

However, Richard said he held no grudge against ECW or Heyman.

“I think if I saw Paul today, I’d shake his hand and hug him,” Richard said. “You don’t stay mad at Paul. Anyway, we ended up even. He blatantly tried to fuck us, and we swerved him and got our thousands, so I’m cool with him.”

SAVING FACE?

On the surface ECW looked healthy. Jim Quinlan, Richard’s replacement as New England promoter, was booking the 5,000-seat Ice Center. Heyman was walking into his Scarsdale, New York, bank every week, carrying stacks of cash. However, the expenses of running ECW from talent to television costs were taking more of a toll than anyone guessed.

However, Heyman continued to insist encouraging signs were on the horizon. ECW’s support in new and old markets continued to be a sign of hope to some. The company’s August 2, 1999, pay-per-view, *Heat Wave*

1999, drew 3,400 fans to the Hara Arena in Dayton, Ohio. The show would ultimately draw a pay-per-view buyrate of .26 (about 104,000 orders), a higher number than any ECW pay-per-view since the company's *Barely Legal* pay-per-view in 1997.

And by the time *Heat Wave* aired, Heyman had made the deal he told wrestlers would be the salvation of the company (a line that must have sounded familiar to those who had also heard him talk about pay-per-view). After seven years, ECW was finally getting a national outlet—the cable network TNN.

CHAPTER 18

ECW ON
(AND OFF) TNN

“We’re on the only network whose corporate office is on wheels!”

–JOEY STYLES

TNN HAD BEEN THE NASHVILLE NETWORK, a country music station, since its formation in 1983. By 1999, the network’s leadership was looking for a change, a format that would appeal to a wider audience. Thus, a spate of new varied programming replaced the plethora of country music videos and talk shows. One of those shows would be ECW wrestling.

The deal appeared to be a good one for ECW. The company did not have to dish out money for the 8 p.m. Eastern timeslot on Fridays. Instead, the TNN-ECW contract stipulated that ECW would pay the network a percentage of any business increases that occurred after the start of the show.

Although the program would mark a clear shift in TNN’s direction, those close to Heyman said he saw that ECW could get something out of it, too—the chance at a national outlet for the first time. However, what no one on ECW’s side realized was that TNN was on the verge of being sold to media conglomerate Viacom, which was negotiating to get the WWF package from the USA Network.

Former Sunshine Network executive Dana Stites said she understood why Heyman placed such emphasis on the need to put ECW on a single national outlet.

“It’s hard to go national if you re just on regional sports networks,” she said. “You’ve got different timeslots in the different parts of the country your shows air in. Its great if you can say you’re on TNT at 12 a.m. on Fridays, but it’s hard to say you’re on Fox Sports Southwest at this time, this other station at that time, and so on.”

The TNN show would be a separate program from the syndicated ECW show that aired in handfuls of local markets across the United States.

“I thought that was going to be the savior of the company,” Steve Corino said, “because at that point, we were having real problems with checks clearing. Paul had been telling people, ‘Things are going to turn around. If you can stick around, please do. If you cant, I understand’. When the TNN thing started, all of the checks started clearing immediately. I thought, ‘Wow, all that hard work paid off’”

HIGHER DEMAND

The TNN deal also brought additional expenses for the still-struggling ECW, as the network required more traditional production values than ECW had made its name with.

Many of the wrestlers shared Heyman’s optimism.

“We all thought TNN was going to be it,” Axl Rotten said. “But we didn’t realize that the company was in so much debt that by the time it got onto TNN, it was already over. Paul E. was borrowing against money he’d already borrowed.”

Others were less positive.

“I didn’t ever have a hopeful feeling,” said Terry Funk, who has correctly predicted many of wrestling’s major happenings over the past 30 years. “I thought, right from the start, that it was just TNN’s way to entice Vince McMahon into moving his shows to that network. They didn’t ever really want ECW, I don’t think.”

TNN gave ECW the visibility needed to make such products as action figures and video games viable. ECW also acted on its new national presence to put out an official ECW magazine. The periodical was on glossy paper and managed to look first-class while maintaining the edginess that was vital to ECW’s identity.

Meanwhile, TNN seemed interested in eroding ECW’s edge, trying to exert control over ECW’s product.

“We all tried to stay optimistic about it,” Jerry Lynn said, “but then they started telling us what to do and what not to do, and the only time they advertised us was on our own show.”

Even some of the people who had stuck with ECW for years looked at the conflicts between Heyman and network officials that existed from the outset and knew that failure here, more than a distinct possibility, could mean the company's doom.

"The ECW Arena shows had only two cameras, which was a very outlaw approach, very bare bones, but Ron Buffone and Charlie Bruzzese turned their limitations into a groundbreaking way of presenting wrestling on television," pay-per-view director Michael Vettor said. "But TNN didn't care about that. TNN required ECW to upgrade everything. They had to upgrade the lighting, the cameras, and everything. TNN had broadcast standards that had to be met. I truly think a big part of what put Paul under was that the revenue wasn't matching expenditures, and a lot of that was more expensive television production. I'm not an economic genius, but you can't run a business very long if you're outspending what you're bringing in."

A HARDCORE REALITY CHECK

The ECW-TNN relationship got off to an ignominious start. The show Heyman had sent, replete with the music videos and long, intense promos that had been a staple of ECW for years, was not what network officials wanted. Heyman was told to send in a replacement show, so he sent in a tape of the Rob Van Dam-Jerry Lynn match from the recent *Hardcore Heaven 1999* pay-per-view. That series was becoming a favorite of many fans for the death-defying antics of the two men.

TNN officials were not pleased, however, as they had been expecting a first-run program, not a show dominated by a previously aired match.

The first ECW show on TNN also made clear that ECW was not going to be able to play the maverick's role to the extent it had previously Clearly, TNN saw ECW as just one of many new programs, and the network expected the wrestling promotion to be a team player. Longtime ECW viewers must have thought it odd to see Joey Styles plugging *Rollerjam*, TNN's short-lived roller derby program, on the first show.

After the Van Dam-Lynn match, TNN viewers got a brief look at ECW's top wrestlers, with the last word on the August 26, 1999, debut going to Taz.

Styles introduced Taz, first by showing top stars in wrestling—including Chris Jericho, Konnan, Mick Foley, and Steve Austin (saved for last)—who had failed to win the title. Then, Styles gave a short list of former champs, including Raven, The Sandman, and Bam Bam Bigelow. After all that buildup, Styles showed the one he called perhaps the most awesome champion of all—Taz. After a short match showcasing Taz's talents against Rhino and another video package, the show ended with some ominous words from the world champion.

Taz promised, "ECW is going to take TNN to the extreme!"

He went on to run down the variety of brutality ECW had to offer, from chair shots to flaming tables, but said that at the end of all of that was him, the world champion, "with the two most vicious weapons in this business, in this federation—these two hands. You see, I don't need a weapon. These hands are my weapon."

However, the truth was he was not going to be in ECW long enough to back up those words. Taz soon gave his notice, because he was leaving for the WWF.

Taz's departure forced some sudden changes of plans, and Heyman reportedly felt a degree of betrayal, because he had just paved the way for another of his top acts to join the WWE Buh Buh Ray and D-Von Dudley had become one of the most effective heel tandems in the wrestling business, but both had begun to grouse about money that they had earned but had not received. By 1999, they were two of ECW's highest-paid stars, and Heyman surely felt he could use his skill at building new attractions to replace them with talent that would not be as expensive.

The September 3, 1999, TNN show, ECW's second on the network, would be the Dudleys' last ECW appearance (it had been taped on August 26), and Heyman had a plan to take ECW fans' minds off of the top team's departure.

Twelve days before the show was taped, the Dudleys dropped the tag titles to longtime foe Balls Mahoney and "Little" Spike Dudley. Matt "Spike" Hyson's character had become the last reminder of the Dudleys' original comedic, sympathetic portrayal. He had stood in opposition to his

bigger bullying brothers and had absorbed frightening amounts of punishment in the role.

Spike's and Balls' title win had been a spectacularly brutal match, with Spike diving onto his "brothers" outside of the ring from a ladder in the ring. At one point, Buh Buh and D-Von lit two tables stacked at ringside and power-bombed Spike through the burning furniture, which garnered a "Holy shit!" chant from the fans in Toledo.

Mahoney's and Spike's win might have seemed predictable, but there seemed nothing Heyman hated worse than predictability. And so it was on what was now publicly their last night in the company that the Dudley Boys shocked the fans in attendance by winning their eighth ECW tag team championship, toppling Spike and Mahoney for the final time.

Apparently exultant in their victory, they announced their intentions to lay the ECW tag belts at the feet of the hated Vince McMahon (in truth, the top heels in ECW had almost always been McMahon and WCW head Eric Bischoff). They then launched into a tirade aimed at ECW stalwart Tommy Dreamer, which ultimately brought Dreamer out. Ostensibly, the ensuing impromptu match was the Dudleys' last tag-title defense, but Dreamer was without a partner.

Dreamer took a hellacious beating before help arrived from a most unexpected source. Raven, still the greatest foe of Dreamer's in-ring career, made his ECW return by storming the ring. He gave a DDT to D-Von and pinned him. Dreamer and his ha ted enemy were the new tag champions.

Behind the scenes, Raven had grown disillusioned with WCW. He believed (as did many) that Hulk Hogan and his cronies had kept the next generation of stars from getting over. Bischoff held a meeting with many of the wrestlers and told them he was tired of hearing the complaints.

"They had the WCW attorney there, and Bischoff said, 'OK, Raven, you want out? There's the door,' and I got up and walked out," Raven said. "Oddly enough, that was the thing that won Bischoff over with me. He came up to me afterward and said, 'Raven, I really respect you for making your stand and sticking to it.'"

True to his word, Bischoff let Raven out of his WCW contract with one stipulation—for the year remaining on the deal, Raven could not go to WCW's archrival, the WWF.

Days before ECW's debut on TNN, Heyman called Raven, who was at home.

“Paul called and thought it was an angle,” Raven said. “I kept telling him, ‘It’s *not* an angle, Paul,’ until he finally believed me and asked me to come in. He made me an offer that was a *lot* more than I would have expected. I thought, ‘Sweet!’ In fact, if they’d paid me everything I was owed, it would have worked out to more per night than I’d been making in WCW.”

Raven also liked the difference in schedule. Whereas WCW once had him on the road for 54 straight nights, his new one-year ECW deal only called for him to work one or two shows a week.

AN AWESOME CHAMPION

As for Taz, Heyman had his replacement ready to go.

Mike Awesome had made his ECW debut at *Holiday Hell 1993*. He had a couple of wins and more losses, including one to J.T Smith at *The Night the Line Was Crossed*, the show that put the three-way match on the wrestling map. He also suffered an opening-match loss to Louis Spicolli, at the January 1997 ECW Arena show.

He returned to ECW on July 4, 1998, for a match against his rival in Japan’s FMW—Masato Tanaka. Their match was a byproduct of the same talent agreement between FMW and ECW that brought Jinsei Shinzaki and Hayabusa to *Heat Wave 1998*. That agreement sent such ECW stars as The Sandman and The Dudleys for tours of Japan before it fell apart in early 1999.

Heyman salvaged his relationship with Awesome and Tanaka and brought them in to be Taz’s challengers at the *Anarchy Ruiz 1999* pay-per-view. The match was a three-way elimination match, meaning the first man to be pinned would be out, leaving the last two to battle until one defeated the other.

Shockingly (to anyone who didn’t see Chris Jericho go out the same way three years earlier), the first out was Taz (just two minutes into the match!), guaranteeing the fans would be seeing a title change.

Fourteen minutes after Taz left the ring, Mike Awesome was donning the ECW championship belt for the first time.

Awesome, billed as a 6-foot-8 giant, looked a lot more like the prototypical big wrestling star than previous ECW champions had, and if his height was slightly exaggerated, his explosiveness was not. Awesome could have easily gotten by on size, but he took to the top rope like a WCW cruiserweight and took sickening bumps through tables and from the ring to the floor. Aside from a brief exchange of the belt with arch-foe Masato Tanaka, Awesome would be a dominant champion for the next few months.

But he wasn't Taz, or the Dudleys, or any of the legion of top ECW stars who had left for greener (as in long green) pastures.

Sheldon Goldberg said ECW lived as long as it did largely because of Heyman's ability to develop new players.

"The fact he was able to take spare parts, people no one else wanted in the industry, and use them to become a force in wrestling on any level is a testament to Paul's booking ability," Goldberg said.

But now, it seemed that talent was going out more quickly than Heyman could effectively build up replacement headliners. Few who saw ECW's pre-TNN days would dispute that the talent was not as star-laden as it had been in years past. Still ECW's style and the effort the wrestlers still put into their matches had its allure for fans less interested in the glitz of pro wrestling's major players.

The ECW that aired on TNN must have made some fans wonder what all the fuss had been about. Not only was the show less extreme than the syndicated *Hardcore TV* show had been, but the TNN show they were watching featured a continually depleting talent base and angles and storylines that often had to be changed midstream to accommodate the departures.

"He just didn't have the talent base that he used to have and nowhere near the star power," Raven said. "I mean there were some, like Jerry Lynn, who's incredibly talented, and Rob Van Dam, who was talented *and* over like a mother. I'm not saying that there was no talent, but if you look at the roster we had the first time I was there, *that* roster was loaded, and it wasn't like that in 1999. You know, ECW was a revolution. It wasn't just a bunch of guys doing hardcore matches. It was a whole different approach. But you cut a couple of the legs off of that revolution, and it's going to stumble, and that's what happened."

But some new fans were still thrilled with what they saw, because the in-ring action was still a wild departure from WCW and the WWF even

though the two big companies had incorporated some “extreme” aspects into their own programs.

Ohio-based fan Ryan Dunch said he first started watching ECW in late 1999.

“I guess the appeal was the general sense of the product,” he said. “It was different than the WWF. I mean, ECW had storylines and all, but it was less about that and more about putting on something special every time they did a show.”

ECW GOES GAMING

For a short while, things appeared to be looking up for ECW. The company looked like it might finally be picking up the types of deals that made major players in the wrestling business. Besides the TNN deal, ECW had finally inked a video game deal after many previous deals had collapsed. The agreement that brought the deal about also infused the company with some cash, as Acclaim Entertainment Inc., one of the nation’s leading video game companies, bought a 15-percent interest in ECW. Under the same agreement, Acclaim signed on as the exclusive maker of ECW games.

The ECW-Acclaim relationship was born out of a bitter divorce between Acclaim and the WWF. A financial dispute ended that relationship, but wrestling was hot, and Acclaim knew it. The company went looking for a new promotion to build a wrestling video game around and came up with ECW.

Acclaim put its money where its hopes were, wiring ECW $300,000 between May and August 1999 before the two companies had even finalized their deal. Under the agreement, Acclaim would pay for its 15 percent of ECW with a series of $250,000 payments until ECW had received $1.5 million.

CONTROVERSY HITS

Although the TNN show itself was not as outrageous as ECW television had traditionally been, it still held its share of controversial moments.

One of the most notorious moments of ECW's TNN run occurred in October 1999. Chris Candido was a solid performer, and his other half was Tammy Sytch, who had been one of the hottest things in wrestling in 1996, as the WWF's Sunny.

Candido (and later Sytch) had come to ECW after their respective WWF departures, but they had problems with painkillers (particularly Nubain, a powerful painkiller often used as an accompaniment to general anesthesia in surgery). In February 1999, Heyman ordered them both into rehab, and when they were ready to go, eight months later Heyman brought them back.

However, the first appearance was Tammy on the TNN show, doing a quasi-shoot interview about her and Chris' problems. ECW hyped the interview as much as it was possible to hype something on TNN, and a lot of people close to the situation saw it as incredibly exploitative even by pro wrestling standards.

The TNN shows displayed a pattern fairly early. They focused on a group of about a dozen ECW wrestlers, including Justin Credible, Jerry Lynn, Lance Storm, Mike Awesome, Rhino, "Insane Luchador" Super Crazy, and "Japanese Buzzsaw" Yoshihiro Tajiri. Much of the rest of the roster found themselves left out as far as national cable exposure was concerned.

"It got to where people called me king of *Hardcore TV"* Anderson said. "Week after week, I had the main events on the old ECW syndicated show, but you hardly ever saw me on TNN. It was a kind of glass ceiling, because TNN featured the same handful of guys every week, and it was like the rest of us were just pushed to the wayside."

As he worked out his notice, Taz did a rushed heel turn and dropped matches to Sabu and then to Rob Van Dam. Fans seemed torn about Tazs departure, as crowd reactions often varied between chants of "You sold out!" to standing ovations, sometimes even in the same match.

Front-row regular John Bailey admitted the ECW faithful could be unpredictable when it came to which wrestlers received appreciative goodbyes and which got bitter chants.

“When Sabu left to do that New Japan date in 1995, Paul really egged the fans on to get them to be that negative about Sabu,” Bailey said. “Usually, though, it was just that some were liked more than others. How we reacted to them leaving had to do with the respect we had for those certain wrestlers in the first place.”

By the end of 1999, longtime cornerstones The Dudleys and Taz were gone, and soon to follow was the man who represented ECW in many ways to many fans—Sabu.

At the time, Heyman believed that Sabu was so banged up that the best thing for him would be to take six months off, which Heyman offered, with pay. Sabu, having been brought up with the old-school “show must go on” mentality, was apparently insulted by the offer. Of course, Heyman was not acting out of the goodness of his heart. According to locker-room insiders during this period, Heyman believed Sabus accumulated damage and injuries were markedly affecting the quality of his matches. In an apparent effort to salvage the professional relationship, Heyman offered for Sabu to spend his six months’ rest on the other side of the camera, learning the daily production end of the wrestling business. Sabu was not interested.

Sabu sent out feelers to friends in the wrestling business, telling them Heyman had violated his contract, meaning he would be free to seek work elsewhere. One of those feelers reached Terry Funk, who told Kevin Sullivan, who had again taken the reins as WCWs booker. Sullivan was no stranger to Sabus work, and in the floundering WCW of early 2000, Sullivan saw Sabu as a potential difference-maker.

Unfortunately, Sabus ECW contract was not as void as he had apparently believed. The provision Sabu said had been violated was a renegotiation clause. However, that clause would have allowed Sabu to cut himself a more lucrative deal if pay-per-view and action-figure sales and other ancillary revenue sources improved. Since those changes did not happen, ECW was not obligated to renegotiate anything.

WCW offered Sabu a big money deal, but before anything became official, lwrestling.com’s Bob Ryder went public with the story on his wrestling news website. In one of many money disputes involving ECW in its latter years, Ryder had switched his allegiance to WCW.

Almost immediately after the story appeared, Heyman called WCW to inquire how badly they wanted to be sued. Even people in WCW at the time

remembered marveling that the corporate braintrust would hire someone without even seeing his contested contract.

When Time-Warners (by then WCWs corporate parent thanks to mergers) lawyers did see the contract, they advised WCW's brass to steer clear of Sabu.

Sabu went back to work for ECW, but not for long.

CHEAPER TALENT

Meanwhile, Heyman continued doing what he had always done to replace departing talent—building new up-and-comers. One was David Cash, also known as Kid Kash, who had wrestled as David Morton and David Jericho. In 1996, he was to have become an ECW regular after a few impressive performances, but Heyman appeared to have no ideas for him at the time.

Tracy Smothers said he saw the writing on the wall with the new crew hitting ECW, but was disappointed with how ECW handled his departure.

"When they started having the financial problems, Paul started bringing in a bunch of young guys he wouldn't have to pay as much," Smothers said. "I would think I was working Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, but then Wednesday would come, and I wouldn't have an airline ticket. There were already rumors about guys being let go, and I called and said, Took, if you're letting me go, it's no problem, because I understand how it is, but just let me know, because I can find work.'"

Deb Beaumont, who worked in the ticket office, told Smothers she did not know if he would be booked again, which Smothers took as a not-so-subtle hint.

"I said, 'OK, I got it,' and I thought that was that. But then, they went around telling people I quit, which was wrong," he said.

The new guys had their stumbles early on. In happier days, Smothers had spent a lot of time working with the young guys, teaching them some of the tricks he'd picked up in his years of experience. Smothers remembered that Mike "Nova" Bucci didn't spend much time working in the ring in his first training session, and Heyman lit into him over it.

“After that, Nova was the first one there and the last to leave,” Smothers said.

Nova also developed rapidly, becoming skilled enough in the ring that he eventually became one of the instructors to the next generation of newcomers.

Brian “The Blue Meanie” Heffron had problems with his cardio, but was well liked by the other wrestlers and got some slack because his role was that of an overly heavy comedy figure. Toward the end of ECW’s life, he would return with a radically different look and with radically improved conditioning, as Blue Boy.

TOTALLY NON-COOPERATIVE NETWORK

Before long, the bloom was off the TNN rose, as far as ECW and Heyman were concerned. One of the problems Heyman claimed to have with TNN was that the network did nothing to promote the fact that it was airing ECW every Friday night. Unless a wrestling fan found out about it online or in one of the newsletters, the only way a new viewer could locate the show was by tripping across it while channel-surfing. The truth was TNN promoted ECW’s premiere and other weeks pretty heavily on the network itself. TNN called press conferences and even held monthly telephone conferences in which wrestling writers interviewed ECW stars.

The other TNN myth was that ECW was the highest-rated show on the network, although ECW posted an above-average rating often logging in the neighborhood of a 1.0, while TNN during the first quarter of 2000 averaged a 0.7 average rating, according to ratings compiled by *Brandweek* magazine. For comparison purposes, the September 20, 1999, edition of WWF’s *Raw*, a two-hour show, drew a 6.0 overall rating while WCWs three-hour *Nitro* drew a 3.0 the same night.

Heyman continued to use the new outlet to expose some new talent, including Corino. Terry “Rhino” Gerin was another new arrival who had a lot of upside.

Corino said Rhino grew into a top-flight performer.

“Paul had him in a dark match with Tom Marquez, and I don’t know if Marquez screwed it up or what, but Rhino gave him a piledriver that looked like it just killed him,” Corino said. “After the match, Paul E. came up and said, ‘Steve Corino meet Rhino. He’s in your group now. You’re gonna talk for Rhino.’ And it was just amazing to watch him develop into that ‘Taz’ spot as the unbeatable monster. At first, I was always talking for him, but he got to where he could do a great threatening promo. The funny thing was Rhino was such a nice guy, so calm, but you could watch his promos and think this was not a guy you would want to hang out with.”

Another pair on the rise was “Dastardly” Danny Doring and Amish Roadkill. Doring’s girlfriend/valet, Miss Congeniality, seemed to be the most popular aspect of their act, because ECW fans never seemed to tire of chanting “She’s got herpes! [clap-clap-clap-clap-clap]” at her. That chant had seemingly been reserved for Francine, but Francine Fournier had become a highly popular character, since switching her allegiance from Shane Douglas to Tommy Dreamer earlier in 1999.

Miss Congeniality did not spend much time in ECW. She dyed her hair and went to the WWF, where she managed Mexican star Essa Rios before switching to a popular tag team, Matt and Jeff Hardy. Amy “Miss Congeniality” Dumas would go on to greater fame in the WWF as Lita.

Another focal point of the TNN shows was a three-way rivalry between Little Guido, “Japanese Buzzsaw” Yoshihiro Tajiri, and “Insane Luchador” Super Crazy. Tajiri and Crazy were spectacular high-fliers who seemed poised to be the next generation of ECW daredevils, and Guido was still one of the most solid workers in the company.

ECW’s current daredevil superstar, Rob Van Dam, found himself out of the picture, after fracturing his ankle in a January 29, 2000, match against Rhino. The next month, Van Dam forfeited the TV title, bringing to an end the longest reign of any champion in wrestling at that time. It also put on the shelf for about six months the man Heyman had been counting on to be the next top star in ECW.

Faced with the loss of Van Dam, Heyman brought Sabu back, but their ensuing blowup would be their last in ECW. After judging Sabu to be not in condition to wrestle more than once, he prepared something different for the innovative daredevil.

Sabu walked into the arena, and Heyman handed him a script for his match with Super Crazy. Sabu said he’d never had a script, but Heyman

insisted he have one now. Sabu flipped through the script and saw the finish—he was to put over Super Crazy clean in the middle.

Sabu balked, but Heyman told him his only alternative was to walk out and breach his contract, which would bar him from working anywhere else for its duration. Sabu had been around the wrestling business long enough to know that this was Heymans intended result, although Heyman reportedly also told him that putting over Super Crazy would help not only the increasingly popular Mexican star, but Sabu as well. Instead, Sabu walked—out of the building and out of ECW for good.

The ultimate winner of the tournament to crown a new TV champ was Super Crazy, and as television champion, Crazy drew the attention of ECW's newest heel faction—The Network.

The Heyman who reacted to TNN executives was a far cry from the charming schmoozer many people saw when they looked at Heyman.

"I was up at the studio more than once when Paul would be screaming at some TNN executive about not promoting ECW," Steve Corino said. "He'd say, 'You guys are screwing us because we're not the WWF!' Paul handled those people differently than a lot of people would have, and I don't think that helped. I was hoping they would work everything out, and when Paul came up with the idea for The Network, I could tell they were gonna be really hot."

And The Network became more villainous, as Heymans disdain for TNN grew. Those feelings hit their furious peak when Heyman learned his network was courting the WWF in an effort to make Vince McMahon's company its provider of wrestling programming. Heyman quickly realized that his company was nothing but an experiment, with TNN using them to gauge whether a wrestling show would fly on the cable network.

"In the beginning I [thought TNN would help ECW], because it was national TV," Francine said. "But as the months went on, TNN never promoted us the right way. We were the guinea pigs to see if wrestling would draw for their station. We were the highest-rated program they had, and that was with almost no advertising. As soon as WWF joined the station, all you saw were ads for them. So ultimately TNN was a big part of our downfall."

THE LAST GENERATION

As one of the top wrestlers connected to ECW's in-ring Network group of heels, Corino had literally worked his way from the bottom of the company to the top. In October 1998, Corino had been in a Stamford, Connecticut, WWF training camp, run by Dory Funk Jr. (brother of ECW's resident legend, Terry, and a world-class wrestler in his own right). Corino's class had included future superstar, Olympic gold medalist, and one-night-only ECW participant Kurt Angle, as well as Christopher Daniels and Devon Storm, among others.

"I was trying to fight for a job in the WWF's wonderful light-heavyweight division," Corino said. "I had to sign a 90-day no-compete, but it only applied to WCW. *On* day 12, Nova [the gifted wrestler who went from being one of Raven's cronies to being one of ECW's most creative in-ring performers] called. We knew each other but weren't tight."

Nova talked to Corino's wife, who told him Corino was at the full-time job he used to put food on the table while chasing his wrestling dream. He said he'd call back.

"Knowing Nova was a big ribber, I figured he must have had something big to get me," Corino said.

But this was no joke.

"He said, 'Paul talked to me about indie guys, and I threw in a good word for you. I don't know the pay, but most likely it'll be me versus you, and you could most likely win a job.'" Corino said he knew this could be the biggest chance of his young career.

"I was pretty nervous going in," Corino said. "I had never met Paul E., and when I got to the back after my match, he said, I'll talk to you later.' I didn't know later' meant five in the morning."

That was when Heyman called to make an offer to Corino.

"He asked me if I wanted to be part of the ECW family," Corino said. "I just said, 'Yes, sir.'"

Corino made his ECW Arena debut on December 19, 1998. Unlike many who came before him, Corino knew what to expect from the harshest audience in wrestling.

“Luckily, I had been around the indies for about four years, and I had wrestled in front of the Philadelphia fans many times before, so I knew they could be tough on newcomers. That was actually one of the things I was worried about. Fortunately, they didn’t crap on me like they crapped on a lot of guys. If you did something wrong or didn’t give 125 percent in your match, they were so passionate that they were going to let you hear about it. That crowd became something I always looked forward to. As hardcore as we were, the fans were equally hardcore.”

Another up-and-comer was a friend of Corino’s and a six-year veteran from North Carolina who also represented an old-school legacy—his name was Wright, but his resemblance to “family” members Arn and Ole led to him being dubbed C.W. Anderson the night of his very first match.

Gene Anderson, the only legitimate Anderson of the bunch, had given permission to some wrestling luminaries in North Carolina, where the Andersons made their biggest name, to continue the name. One of them was the promoter for whom C.W. wrestled his first match, and he saw in C.W. the work ethic and credibility that had made the Andersons successful.

Nearly two years after ECW expired, C.W. met Alan “Ole Anderson” Rogowski, longtime partner of Gene. Ole gave C.W. his blessing as well, which C.W. said meant a lot to him.

“To be honest, I didn’t really need it, that permission, but it was important for me to get that, out of respect for him,” C.W. Anderson said. “When I first got the name, it was stressed that I should never job the name out or disrespect it. I wanted to be the Anderson they were, keeping the credibility.”

C.W. Anderson started with Paul Heymans company on June 6, 1999, the night of an ECW show in Georgia that he attended with Scott “Lodi” Vick, one of Andersons wrestling pupils, who had graduated to the ranks of WCW. WCWs braintrust had decided that C.W. did not have “the look” the company wanted in its performers.

Another of Andersons pupils had a tryout at the ECW show, and he asked Anderson to accompany him.

“He said, ‘Come down with me. If you cant get in the ring, you can at least say hello and let them know who you are,’” Anderson said. “I really didn t want to, because I didn’t want to be a seeker, but he talked me into it.”

Anderson was backstage before the show, talking to his friends, Simon Diamond and Steve Corino, when Nova approached and asked if Anderson had his trunks and boots.

One of wrestlings unwritten rules is, “Always bring your gear,” and Anderson had been following the rule on this night.

“He told me to go get my gear out of my car and get in the ring with Simon,” Anderson said.

As Anderson and Diamond worked out in the ring, Heyman was walking by and saw them. Minutes before showtime, Heyman called Anderson over to him and offered him a job on the spot.

“Paul introduced himself and said, ‘Welcome to ECW,’” Anderson said. “If ever there was a case where I was in the right place at the right time, it was that. The whole night was like a blur to me. I was just in the zone of whatever I was doing. It was almost like a dream.”

Anderson went on to become Tommy Dreamers last major ECW feud as the company revisited the “old school versus extreme” theme that had resulted in fondly remembered battles in years gone by.

“We were in Chicago, and Paul wanted me and RVD to work a match,” Anderson said. “Tommy came up to me before the match and said, ‘This is the one that will make you or break you. We went out there, and we had a great match. When we got back to the back, Paul came up and hugged me and said, *‘Tha’t* what I wanted to see.’”

Shortly after that event came the 1999 *November to Remember* show, in which Anderson wrestled Kid Kash. After his match, Anderson got the accolade that he knew made his part of ECW’s unique family.

“Turned out, Tommy’d had his eye on working with me, and after that match, he told me, ‘C.W, you’re one hell of a worker, and I cant wait to put you over,’” Anderson said.

Andersons 1999 arrival put him in the class of Corino, Rhino, and Simon Diamond, among others—the crew of a young wrestlers whom Heyman was attempting to turn into ECW’s next generation of main-eventers. As it turned out, the crew would be ECW’s *last* generation of performers, and not of all of them would be accepted as replacements for the departing Dudleys, Taz, or other ECW stars seeking greener pastures.

TONIGHT ON *NITRO:* THE ECW CHAMPION?

Temporary departures also hampered Heyman's ability to plan major programs. Tommy Dreamer suffered a torn bicep and injured shoulder in a Cleveland match with Simon Diamond and Johnny Swinger on top of Van Dam's broken ankle.

Whatever monkey wrench the temporary losses caused Heyman's plans was nothing compared to the abrupt departure of Mike Awesome.

On April 10, 2000, WCW's *Nitro* promised the dawn of a new era with Eric Bischoff (ousted in late 1999) teaming with former head writer Vince Russo (who had abruptly left the WWF in 1999 to assume writing duties in WCW after Bischoff's departure) to head the company.

One of the show's many surprises was the debut of Awesome, who would attack Kevin Nash.

Feeling the financial pinch of too many withheld paychecks, Awesome had reached out to Horace Boulder, a friend from their days together in Japan's FMW. Boulder was now wrestling as Horace Hogan, as he was the Hulkster's real-life nephew. Horace contacted his uncle, whose pull in WCW was still substantial. WCW was a dwindling industry giant and was only too eager to use Awesome to try to pump some life into a *Nitro* franchise that was dying on the vine.

With Awesome giving notice in the most public way possible, Heyman found himself in the all-too-familiar position of having to explain away a no-show, only this time it was his champion.

Ohio fan Ryan Dunch went to a show in western Pennsylvania, for which Awesome had originally been slotted. Dunch said he knew Awesome would not be there as soon as he saw Awesome's manager, "Judge" Jeff Jones, walk to ringside alone.

"He made some lame excuse for not being there, and it turned into one of those Heyman gimmicks where one guy comes out after another and it turns into a big train wreck. By the time the show was over, the crowd didn't seem too upset about Awesome not being there, but you could tell that things like that were just harbingers of things to come."

However, Heyman and those close to him in ECW apparently knew something was amiss the weekend before Awesome's planned *Nitro* debut. That Saturday, ECW had a show in Birmingham, Alabama, and Awesome was not there. More than one person tried his cell phone. No answer. Finally at 2 a.m. Heyman reached Awesomes wife at home. She said Mike wasn't there, that he was at the airport, but she would be happy to tell him Heyman had called. According to an ECW insider who discussed the conversation with Heyman, her calmness betrayed Awesomes intentions.

"If my [spouse] got a call at 2 a.m. from his employers, who he should be with, asking where he was, I'd be panicked, but she was apparently calm as could be," the person said.

Heyman reportedly reached Steve Karel and asked him to put all featured wrestlers not under contract onto 30-day agreements, binding them to the company under the terms to which they and ECW had been operating to prevent further jumps.

The day of Awesomes planned debut on *Nitro*, Heyman and his lawyers were working all day in a federal courtroom in Buffalo, either to prevent Awesome's appearance or to make WCW pay a steep price for it.

WCW's original plan was to have Awesome go on *Nitro* and throw the ECW belt in a garbage can, as woman wrestler Madusa had done five years earlier with the WWF women's championship. However, Heyman did what Vince McMahon could not—he got an injunction, which kept that from happening.

As with Sabu, Awesome's existing ECW contract came back to bite WCW in its corporate ass. Awesome had shown WCW a copy of his contract and enumerated various provisions he claimed had been breached, thus freeing him up to join WCW. However, for whatever reason, WCW failed to heed a clause in Awesome's contract that stated ECW had 30 days to remedy any breach brought to managements attention.

Because Awesome's ECW contract was still in effect, WCW had to pay Heyman about $250,000 for Heyman to release him. Under the agreement the two sides reached, WCW announcers had to mention Awesome as the ECW champion and say he would be defending the belt in Indianapolis a few days later.

That night, Awesome made his debut, but lead announcer Tony Schiavone would not say Awesome was ECW champion, nor did he

mention the upcoming title defense. Fellow announcer Scott Hudson mentioned Awesome worked for ECW, but that was it.

Because the announcers never mentioned Awesome as ECW champ or the upcoming title defense, WCW had violated the agreement, which did not please the judge presiding over the dispute. The night after the fateful *Nitro*, federal marshals hauled Awesome out of the Colorado Springs arena where he had planned to make his second appearance for WCW.

WCW now seemed to realize the gravity of its situation and offered Heyman the chance to put Heyman and Dreamer over in a tag match over Awesome and Eric Bischoff live on *Nitro*. WCW offered to allow ECW guys to lay out Awesome also live on *Nitro*.

Heyman was not interested. His counter-offer was another cash settlement, and the use of Awesome in ECW one last time. Heyman demanded that Awesome show up to drop the title in a three-minute match with Heyman having the only say as to the finish and as to the person to defeat Awesome. Having aroused a federal judge's anger by violating the original agreement, WCW was in no position to turn Heyman down.

As soon as the agreement was done, Heyman got on the phone and called the WWF's Bruce Prichard.

And so Awesome showed up for ECW's Indianapolis show on April 13, 2000, awaiting his mystery challenger.

Suddenly, a World Wrestling Federation theme hit the sound system, and the place seemed to explode. You might think that a curious reaction to a WWF theme, but it was the WWF entrance music of Tazz.

Since starting in the WWF in January 2000, Taz had picked up an extra "z" at the end of his name, but had not been used as much of a featured player. In his debut, Tazz became the wrestler who ended Olympic gold medalist-turned-WWF rookie Kurt Angle's win streak in a way carrying out his words from Angle's 1996 appearance in the ECW Arena. After that, Tazz's push seemed to lose momentum until a torn bicep put him out of action for a couple of months, and when he returned, he turned heel with no rhyme or reason. Since that time, he had floundered with no real direction for his character.

But ECW fans in Indianapolis welcomed him back and gave him a big ovation when he choked out Awesome. Heyman had sent Tazz over to Awesome's hotel room to tell him the match and the finish, because Heyman did not want Awesome in the ECW dressing room.

In videotaping the match, Heyman pulled off what he thought was a coup—a WWF wrestler beating a WCW wrestler for the ECW title on ECW television. The coup was an expensive one, though, and its main long-term effect seemed to be an irreversible cheapening of the ECW champions protrayal as the toughest man in wrestling, an image Heyman had always tried to keep for his titleholders. During Tazz's week-plus as champion, he appeared on the WWF show *Smackdown! Tazz* challenged WWF champion Triple H, who not only defeated him soundly, but also made the next champion look inept via a botched run-in.

That next champion was Tommy Dreamer, one man who literally worked his way from the bottom of ECW to the top, which he reached on April 22, 2000. Dreamer beat Tazz for the title, which Joey Styles sold as the culmination of Dreamer's long struggle in ECW. However, as always, Heyman had another surprise in mind. Justin Credible showed up to interrupt Dreamer's celebration and challenged him on the spot. Minutes later, Credible was the new ECW world champion.

As for Awesome, he got the bigger (and non-bouncing) paychecks he had been seeking, but they came with a cost—the long-term viability of his character. Awesome had never been the most polished performer, but he had gotten over through sheer physical intensity and by being a big man who could fly. Instead of capitalizing on these strengths, WCW writer Vince Russo decided to make Awesome a comedy character, first as the Fat Chick Thriller, a character attracted to obese women, and then as That '70s Guy, an obvious takeoff on the fairly popular *That 70s Show*. Russo apparently failed to see that wrestling fans were not going to think of a retro comedy act as a potential main-eventer, and Awesome floundered.

Awesome's plight seemed to show WCW's ineptness at promoting new talent, but another departing ECW star would end the WWF's streak of making the most of newcomers.

THE IMPENDING DOOM

Although Johnny Polo was a distant memory in the WWF, Raven was a different character, and one that Levy decided to bring to the company

after growing disillusioned with ECW, both in terms of TNN's treatment of the company and in terms of what he saw as Heyman's flagging creativity. Heyman had been ECW's booker for seven years by this point, and Raven saw a creative force that was running dry.

Raven said that, contrary to what Heyman and some others in and around the company thought, he had not intended simply to wait out his no-compete and then bolt to the WWF. When he signed back up with ECW in August 1999, Raven had intended to stay.

"I thought ECW was going to go places with them getting TNN," he said. "I didn't realize Paul E. was so burnt out. My drug use had gotten bad by then, too, and Paul took it as me not caring. In my mind, I thought that Paul was fumbling the ball, and I thought if he didn't give a shit, then I wasn't going to give a shit. That doesn't mean I was going to go out there and just lay down, because I'd never do that, but there's a definite difference between bringing your A game and bringing your B game."

Raven left for the WWF, and he said the split and the last few months of his final ECW stint were so acrimonious that he and Heyman did not speak to each other for five years, except for the most necessary of communications when both were in the WWF in 2001.

As 2000 wore on, ECW's financial struggles were becoming more pronounced with more people not being paid and with more checks bouncing.

"Half the time, the paychecks just weren't coming," Jerry Lynn said.

Trying to keep the real-life inspiration for its video game alive, Acclaim poured another $350,000 into ECW in January and February, because Heyman had no other way of even covering his payroll for the talent.

In some cases, that talent was not costing ECW a bundle. C.W. Anderson said he had worked for the company for months before reaching a point of desperation over his nightly rate. Figure in what he paid for hotels and travel, and Anderson's $75-a-night rate translated into a net loss.

"There was paying for gas and all that other stuff, and we were on the road so much I only ever got a day to rest at most," Anderson said. "I ended up losing my house, my wife, and my truck. At one point, I went to [Tommy] Dreamer and broke down in front of him. I said, 'I need a raise, or I just can't do this anymore.' Paul set me down and said he'd bump my pay to $100 a night. A week later, they bumped it up to $200, but anyone who

says I haven't paid my dues or wants to bitch because they lost money, they can kiss my ass—they got flown that whole time."

A year after Shane Douglas left over money problems, ECW's longtime ring announcer departed for similar reasons. Like Douglas before him, ring announcer Bob Artese saw the financial troubles as dire omens.

"I got out a year before ECW actually closed," Artese said. "It was a mess. Everybody was owed money, and obviously the workers had to put up with it, but I had two other jobs, so this was not my primary source of income and I was getting fed up."

What finally exhausted Artese's patience was not a problem with his paychecks, however, but with travel.

"What Paul always did with me, and with the referees, too, was that, since we had our own jobs, he would let us book our own flights and then reimburse us," Artese said. "We knew when we needed to be somewhere for a show, and this let us book flights that would work with our schedules. Well, the last year I was there, Paul never reimbursed us, and I couldn't get him to do it. You know, I wouldn't have mind working for not much, but doing shows and losing money on the deal, I just couldn't continue."

Artese said that between problems with TNN and bouncing paychecks, the mood in the dressing room grew darker in the last months he worked for ECW.

"Everyone knew it was almost running week to week, and that every show could be the last," Bob Artese said. "When the guys would leave after the shows, they'd tell each other, 'See you next week,' but they wondered if they really would."

Still, others said Heyman did what he could to make things as right as they could get.

"Ten of my checks bounced, but Paul made good on all 10 and paid the bank fees," Francine said.

Sometimes, the checks did not bounce because they did not come at all. And the stream of excuses from Heyman never seemed to end. There was the time the Federal Express building in Dallas, the one containing all the guys' checks, burned down. There was the time the delivery service put the paychecks on the wrong plane, which took them to the wrong city. And few who were in the company at the time will forget the night in Canada that Heyman couldn't pay anyone, because he first had to get that night's gate receipts exchanged for American dollars. More than once, Heyman

sent office members Deb Beaumont and Jim Molineaux to the airport to pick up payments he knew would not be arriving.

"I definitely wanted to see Paul pay for what he did to us, lying to us, not paying us," C.W. Anderson said. "I remember those end-of-the-night speeches he would give, where he would have everybody clapping. I would just be standing there thinking, 'What are all of you people so excited about? None of us is getting paid!' But, like I said, Paul could make you believe anything, and he made us believe it was going to keep going and we would all get what we were owed."

But as ominous as ECW's situation seemed to be, Heyman would never admit it was anything but rosy.

Trancine said people believed, in part, because they wanted to so badly.

"Pauls next career should be as a motivational speaker," Francine said. "He can make you believe that the sky is green, and the grass is blue. We wanted to believe that he was going to save us. We all loved ECW and each other. Each week we would just sit there and listen to Pauls speeches. We all had hope. But hope couldn't save us."

"With Paul, you never got the truth," Bob Artese said. "If he had sat down and said, 'We're having some money problems,' that would have been one thing, and I think people would have worked with him on it, but according to him, everything was fine. The only thing was, it wasn't, because no one was getting paid."

THE IN-RING ACTION

Rob Van Dam returned to action for the company's July 8, 2000, show in the ECW Arena. Soon he was embroiled in a feud with former friend Scotty Anton (who had wrestled as Scotty Riggs in WCW), as Heyman built up to a feud with Rhino, the man against whom Van Dam had injured his ankle. Rhino had also acquired the TV title Van Dam had held for so many months by the time Van Dam had returned from injury.

The push toward a Rhino-RVD showdown intensified, with Van Dam scoring wins over "The Man-Beast" (as Rhino was known) in tag matches.

Another one of the top feuds in ECW around that time was Steve Corino against the most unlikely ECW competitor since Sid Vicious—Dusty Rhodes.

Corino had developed a persona that was perfectly suited for a top heel's role in ECW. He became "Old School" Steve Corino, someone who cried for the return of traditional wrestling without all the extreme trappings.

"I used to go see ECW shows, and there would always be guys who wanted to be hardcore," Corino said. "I thought it would be cool if I could be the opposite. I would say wrestlers needed to go back to doing the hip toss, not all these chairs and the violence. It worked on the indies, and that first night I came into ECW, Paul E. asked me where I envisioned my character. I described my gimmick, and he lit up. He just said, 'Steve Corino, that's what you're gonna be.'"

Corino's anti-hardcore persona blamed Dusty Rhodes, recently released from WCW, for being a founding father of the hardcore trend. Rhodes had, in fact, wrestled in more than his share of bloody death matches and bullrope bouts over the course of his quarter-century in the wrestling business.

Corino said the feud got off the ground the week after an angle where he crashed a Limp Bizkit concert in Peoria, Illinois, to insult the fans there. That appearance got ECW a small amount of mainstream coverage.

"For a week, I was the darling of TNN," Corino said, laughing. "They were so happy to see me. That got a pretty good rating, and MTV was all over it. The next week in Atlanta [where Rhodes had been a big favorite for 20-plus years], was where the thing with Dusty started. Paul told me this was the beginning of a big push. Dusty had just gotten released from WCW, so it was the perfect opportunity."

The feud culminated in a bullrope match at the *Living Dangerously 2000* pay-per-view on March 12, 2000. The show drew a .24 pay-per-view rating, which meant nearly a million people ordered the show, the largest number for an ECW pay-per-view in seven months. Still, that number was a fraction (and not a sizable one) of what WWF shows were doing at the time. ECW's numbers were closing in on WCW's pay-per-view numbers, but that was more a reflection of WCW dying on the vine than of any kind of ECW surge.

Corino had also gotten to team with a legitimate old-schooler, Ken "Jack Victory" Rinehurst. Jack Victory made his big-time debut in 1984, as a preliminary wrestler in Bill Watts' Mid-South Wrestling company. He worked his way around the territories, proving himself as a solid performer, but one who could never seem to make it to the top level.

Still, Corino said each night of working with Victory was an education, as he proved to be a salty wrestler who knew how to get to crowds. Away from the ring and the TV cameras, Corino said, Victory was as good-hearted as he was mean in front of them.

C.W. Anderson also remembered Jack Victory fondly, as a rare breed of veteran, one who wanted to be one of the boys more than he wanted to be revered.

"You'll never meet anyone on earth more genuine than Jack Victory," Anderson said. "Nearly all the veterans I had known would never joke and carry on with the younger boys in the locker room. Jack would rib you like you and he were brothers. And on car trips, most veterans would want to sit in the back and sleep, but Jack was always asking to drive. Anyone who could ever say something bad about Jack Victory, well, there would have to be something wrong with that person."

The TV title was not the only one vacated in 2000. In April, Justin Credible had vacated the tag belts the same night he beat Dreamer for the singles title. The Impact Players were no more with Lance Storm having moved on to WCW.

The new champions, by virtue of a tournament win, were Yoshihiro Tajiri and Mikey Whipwreck. Whipwrecks return from WCW had seen him trade in his ultimate underdog character for a deranged lunatic, managed by Jim "Sinister Minister" Mitchell.

One of the many strange vignettes featuring the three of them resulted in injury to Mitchell's hand, just before the 2000 *November to Remember* pay-per-view. A pipe to be used in a "fire-throwing" gimmick during the show went off while Mitchell was getting ready backstage, injuring his stomach and blowing off part of his left index finger.

LOAN SHARK

When he was trying to build up the upcoming *ECW: One Night Stand* pay-per-view in June 2005, Vince McMahon touted the $587,500 in loans he had made to ECW as proof he had supported the company all along. However, the timing of the first of those major loans would seem to make that story at least a little suspect.

McMahon made that sizable loan to the HHG Inc., ECW's corporate identity, in summer 2000, around the same time he was negotiating the deal that would bring his flagship program *Monday Night Raw* to TNN. Part of the deal was exclusivity, meaning no other wrestling could air on the network. The only one immediately affected by that aspect of the WWF deal was ECW.

Was the loan an effort to assuage Heyman's fury over losing his national outlet? Who knows? However, there are many in both ECW and in WWE today who believe that the loan and its timing were neither pure benevolence nor coincidence.

"ECW should still be alive today," Jerry Lynn said. "In ECW, you could see the same things you saw on Vinces show. Part of me truly thinks that McMahon saw that ECW had the potential to get too big, and he pulled the plug."

Shortly before the deal was sealed, Heyman tried to use TNNs own airwaves to vent his frustrations with the network regarding what he saw as the cable networks mistreatment of ECW.

For those who saw the silent broadcast and have been wondering, Heyman thanked viewers for watching and said:

> *You'd have to be an ECW fan to watch this show, because God knows, the network has never put on one freakin' commercial or one press release to let you know that were here. But that's their scheme of things. You see in just a few weeks, the network is going to give a hundred million dollars to Vince McMahon*, like he needs it, *to replace us in case they haven't thrown us off before then. And the fact of the matter is were not a publicly funded company, like Vince McMahon or WCW We survive, or even thrive, on your support, and for that we thank you. Now in an industry where everybody wants to be real, and everybody wants to do a shoot, this, my friends, is a shoot. We hate this stinkin' network! We hate their guts for abandoning us! We hate their guts for not supporting us! We hate their guts for not advertising us,*

and we hate their guts for not having the balls *to throw us off the air! Now, just in case you re watching this, hey, network—I dare you to throw me off the air! Because I'm going to break every rule that you put in front of me until you throw me the hell off the air. Now, this, my friends, is a shoot. You'd better take that hundred million dollars that you're gonna give Vince McMahon, and you'd better spend it on attorneys. Because I promise you, network, the war has just begun."*

It was one of the most captivating rants to come from Heyman, who was always known as a great promo man. However, TNN refused to let viewers hear the shoot promo from Heyman. Instead, the network showed the image of Heyman delivering his bitter speech, only with the sound cut off. As Heyman ranted silently, a crawl ran across the bottom of the screen, containing a message from TNN that the network fully supported ECW and Heyman, wished nothing but success for them both, and speculated that Heyman could be impaired by virtue of taking too many chairshots.

Heyman was wrong about one key thing—the war had not just begun. In fact, ECW's fighting days were about to come to an end.

C.W. Anderson said the version of the story the wrestlers got painted TNN as villains, but because the person painting that version was Heyman, he did not know how much of it he believed five years later.

"Paul can make you believe anything," Anderson said. "He could have you believing the sky was a different color, and we were all 'drinking the Kool-Aid,' as people called it. Whatever Paul was telling us, we believed. And, according to Paul, everything TNN told us was a lie. Paul told us he was doing anything possible to get kicked off the network, so they would breach their contract and he could sue. When it first started, everyone thought it was great, but that didn't last long."

McMahon soon sealed the deal, and *Raw* would start on TNN in September 2000. McMahon was willing to temporarily waive the exclusivity clause as it regarded ECW, effectively allowing ECW to remain on the network. But Heyman knew his company's future on the network (and likely overall) was bleak and stopped sending shows to TNN.

The hot-potato treatment of the world title continued at ECW's October 1, 2000, pay-per-view, *Anarchy Ruiz 2000*, where Jerry Lynn conquered Credible, who had been his first major rival in ECW. The show

also featured a long-awaited match. In their first major singles match for the TV title, Rhino shocked the fans by defeating Van Dam.

Five days later, ECW's last TNN show aired. The last match featured not full-time wrestlers, but two men who had been feuding over the color commentators position—Joel Gertner and Cyrus.

CHAPTER 19

EXTINCT CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING

“I think Paul [Heyman] is a great promoter and a terrific creative genius when it comes to utilizing a person’s strength and stuff like that on the air. But delegation and stuff like that is his downfall. He’s a terrible manager.”

—AL SNOW IN A 2001 INTERVIEW

FOR THE WRESTLING BUSINESS IN THE UNITED STATES, 2001 was the worst of times, but not every fan knew it.

The WWF was riding a wave of popularity like no other wrestling company ever had. Buoyed by the popularity of superstars Stone Cold Steve Austin and The Rock, the WWF was on the verge of putting on its most successful show ever—*Wrestlemania XVII* in Houston’s Astrodome. (Incidentally, that show featured more than a dozen performers who had appeared in ECW rings.)

But things weren’t so rosy elsewhere. WCW, which had been pummeling the WWF in the ratings, suffered a $62 million loss in 2000, mostly through mismanagement of talent and creative ineptitude. Things were bad enough that America Online/Time-Warner, the conglomerate that owned WCW, was looking to sell the wrestling promotion. There were even rumors of the TBS networks replacing WCW with ECW or at least a Heyman-run company.

FOXED OUT

The year 2000 was about finished, and for all intents and purposes, ECW was, too, even if the death had not been formally announced yet. Heyman had finally run out of carrots to dangle, and ECW had run out of chances. Fox Sports Net cable stations were an option, but Heyman saw it as an unfeasible one.

People who knew both men said Steve Karel had once told Heyman the key to selling advertising on television was to be able to sell the idea that the ads would run on a network. In the long run, regional outlets were not enough, and Fox Sports Net was little more than a collection of regional outlets.

The Fox deal would have also required almost a complete overhaul of ECW's approach to television. What Fox wanted was a half-hour ECW show that could run four to five times a week. There was a discussion of ECW receiving a nominal rights fee, but Heyman apparently saw that the fee would not even come close to covering the costs of producing such a show. Advertising revenues would help, but advertising is not a cash-upfront business, and wrestling is. For Heyman, who had been so desperate for a lifeline, it had to be heartbreaking to throw one aside, but he knew this particular one would not keep ECW afloat.

"I think Paul Heyman tried to the very end to keep it going, but he just couldn't anymore," pay-per-view consultant Elizabeth Tutt said.

2001: THE END OF THE ODYSSEY

For ECW, the beginning of 2001 was the end of everything.

One of many ill omens was Heymans absence from live events. After years of attending practically every ECW show, Heyman was nowhere to be found.

"[I knew there were problems] when we didn't get paid and when Paul stopped coming to the shows," Francine stated. "We were all under a ton of stress, and we weren't sure what was going to happen. We knew the end was coming; we just didn't want it to happen."

The loss of TNN was devastating, but Heyman still had some pay-per-views on the schedule and explained his uncharacteristic absences from

house shows by telling wrestlers he was in Los Angeles, trying to put together another deal that could keep the company afloat. Many on the roster speculated he was actually just laying low, trying to avoid the growing number of wrestlers with bounced checks.

Tutt said she realized there were serious problems "when I suddenly wasn't getting paid."

As it turned out, he really was spending at least a little time in Los Angeles, filming scenes for the remake of the movie *Rollerball*, in which Heyman would play essentially a cameo role as an announcer for the frenetic futuristic sport whose violence made ECW look tame.

"What was really bad was when he was telling us he was out in L.A. to find us a new TV outlet, when he was really out there making himself some money by appearing in *Roller hall"* Jerry Lynn said.

As uncertainty about ECW's future grew, the pressure started getting to some of those who had been most loyal to it for the longest.

"Tommy Dreamer started off with me as a guy who was always willing to help," Steve Corino said. "We had a lot of fun at our house show matches, not so much in our actions. He would do his innovative hardcore styles, and I would bump. But we would just go back and forth. Once in Fort Lauderdale, we did 54 minutes, and I think 25 of them were on the mie. The Dudleys would always be going first if Corino-Dreamer was on the show, our 'dog and pony show,' as D-Von called it."

Over time, however, their relationship changed.

"I don't know where the animosity came from, but Tommy wasn't the guy he was before. I don't know if he thought he was threatened, or I was going to take his spot or what, but it got to where we just didn't talk anymore."

Even as the end loomed, Heyman continued trying to develop and build new talent. December 3, 2000's *Massacre on 34th Street*, ECW's last pay-per-view show of 2000 (and second to last overall as it turned out), saw Corino win the ECW world title. In another title change that night, the undercard was filled with a slew of recent debuts—E.Z. Money, Christian York, Joey Matthews, and Julio Dinero, among them.

A month later was *Guilty as Charged*, ECW's Janunary 7, 2001, pay-per-view finale. The stink of death was evident to many, but Heyman continued to deny it.

“That last pay-per-view in New York, it was apparent that this could be it,” Vettor said. “A group of guys were saying they should walk, but I said, ‘Let’s go out with a bang if this is it. It’s not just about Paul, or how he might owe you money.’ My feeling was those were dedicated fans, and that show was something special.”

Sinking to previously unplumbed depths, Heyman promised a “holy shit” surprise for the show, which led to many speculating that *Guilty as Charged* would see the announcement of a new TV deal or some other development that would stem the tide that had ECW sinking.

Instead, the surprise turned out to be Rob Van Dam’s return after several weeks away to face Jerry Lynn one last time on pay-per-view.

Van Dam and Heyman reached an agreement for the high-flying star to appear at the show even though Van Dam was still owed money he had earned on past shows. However, even with Van Dam placated, the main event almost did not happen at all. Jerry Lynn said he almost decided not to work the show that would prove to be ECW’s last pay-per-view.

“It was a really bad atmosphere,” Lynn said. “About a week out from the event, the rumors were that we would only be getting half of our checks.”

When Lynn got to the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York on January 7, 2001, he sought out and confronted Heyman about the rumor about half an hour before *Guilty as Charged 2001* was to start. Heyman told him it was true—he would only be getting half of what he was owed.

Lynn said, “I told Paul, 1 don’t know if I want to work tonight. I told the boys I might not do it, and they understood. It’s nothing personal, Paul; I just don’t know if I want to do it,’” Lynn said. “Paul said, Are you sure? It’s gonna be great!’ I asked what the plan was, and he said I was going to be working Rob in the main event.”

Lynn asked what the finish was, and he did not like the answer he got.

“He said I’d be putting Rob over,” Lynn said. “I asked if I was going to get my heat back, [I had just turned heel], and Paul said no, he wanted to send the people home happy. Well, when it was Jerry’s night to finally beat Rob, we had six guys run in, and when I beat Justin for the title, it was New Jack running in. I’m a professional, and just doing a job wasn’t going to make me reluctant to do the show, but with the money issue, it was a factor.”

Heyman eventually agreed to pay Lynn upfront, and Lynn went on with the show.

"That's the reason I was wearing different tights that night," he said. "I didn't pack my gear, so I had to borrow tights from [another wrestler] The Mustakeer, and his waist was bigger than mine, so I had to have black electrical tape to hold up the tights. I didn't even pack—*that's* how much I didn't want to show up. Looking back on it, I wish I had held out, but the truth is I needed the money."

Lynn said he knew immediately afterward that ECW was through.

"Oh, I think everyone knew last two house shows were going to be it," he said.

The Sandman regained the ECW title that night, but lost it two minutes later to TV champion Rhino. To the very end, Heyman mixed real life into his wrestling storylines—in challenging The Sandman, Rhino said he had no more use for the TV title.

"We're not even on fuckin' TV anymore," he snarled, throwing the belt down.

The show ended with Justin Credible and Steve Corino as the new Impact Players, but they never got a chance to make an impact.

The wrestlers at *Guilty as Charged* were understandably skittish. For all of Heyman's protestations that ECW would go forward, there were only two shows left on the schedule.

One of those was a TV taping in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. About 1,200 fans showed up, but only a skeleton crew of wrestlers did. Super Crazy and Tajiri almost didn't go, but Victor Quinones told them to appear, because Heyman was the one who had made them commodities in the United States. Also missing was the TV belt. When Rhino threw it down, someone picked it up, and it was nowhere to be found by the time the Poplar Bluffs tapings were starting.

The next night, ECW finally ground to a halt in the most unlikely of places—Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Backstage, people were telling each other Heyman could still pull something out at the last minute. Dreamer was telling people that ECW had another pay-per-view slot, on March 11, and that there would be a show.

Still, after the last match (for you trivia buffs, the last match at an ECW show was The Sandman versus Justin Credible), the two men involved hugged each other. Tommy Dreamer brought trashcans full of beer

to the ring, and what was left of the ECW roster toasted each other in the ring and toasted the fans in attendance. It was a lengthy, teary end to a company built on blood and sweat.

Practically any hopes that anyone connected to ECW, as a fan or as a wrestler, had about the company's future were dashed once and for all on March 5, 2001. That night, *WWF Raw* debuted a new announcer to replace Jerry "The King" Lawler, who left in a dispute that ended with the firing of his wife, Stacy "The Kat" Carter. Lawler's replacement—Paul Heyman.

The same day, cable companies announced that the March 11 ECW pay-per-view would be a replay of Januarys *Guilty as Charged*.

Some held onto hope for far too long.

"I never did realize it would go under, but looking back now, the signs were definitely there," C.W. Anderson said. "Lou [D'Angeli, who worked as Sign Guy Dudley and Lou E. Dangerously] and Jack [Victory] always had their doomsday scenarios. They were always saying it was about to end, but I didn't believe it. No one ever came to us and said, 'This is it.' Even when I saw Paul on *Raw*, I thought there was still some hope. I was like, 'This is ECW; there's no way it's going to go out of business.' It had all that support, and everyone seemed to just love it. I guess I was just ignorant, and I had worked so hard to get to that level. After ECW folded, I was right back where I started from—back in the indies."

But the name he earned in ECW served him well.

"The difference now was I went from the $20 or so a night I made for the first seven or eight years of my career to hundreds of dollars and easily over a $1,000 when I go overseas," Anderson said. "I made my name in ECW, and working there got me to where I could quote a certain price."

Anderson was not the only one who had thought ECW would pull through.

"When I realized it was the last show in Boston, I was really surprised," Stu Kaplan said. "I really thought it would keep going and going. I had heard the rumblings about money problems and this and that, but I cant think of anybody saying, This is it; this is the end.' And I've been in enough locker rooms to know wrestlers always have their resumes tacked on their backs."

THE BOTTOM LINE

In the final analysis, ECW and Heyman lost about $7 million over nine years of operation. WCW, under Jim Herd's watch, lost $19 million in three years.

New England independent promoter Sheldon Goldberg, who had experience in dealing with Heyman for the Japanese at ECW's first pay-per-view, said that for all of Heymans dreams of making ECW big, his chaotic style of running things was better suited for a smaller organization.

"Paul was a tremendous creative and marketing guy," Goldberg said. "I don't think there's a single person in the history of wrestling who, as a sole person, had a more dead-on sense of how to market a wrestling concept than Paul Heyman. He deserves a tremendous amount of credit for—I don't know if I'd say a change in the business—but at a time dominated by two companies, he was a guy who proved someone with good ideas could exist alongside the big guys. Once he started dealing with InDemand and TNN, they were not going to be enamored with Paul flying by the seat of his pants. Once he went on pay-per-view, it was becoming a very different kind of entertainment, and the Heyman style of doing business wasn't going to last on that level."

In the end, ECW was one extreme contradiction piled onto another. Its fans claimed to eschew the concept of style over substance that much of the wrestling world embraced, yet those same fans gave enormous ovations to Dusty Rhodes and Sid Vicious. The fans also purported to be the "smartest" of the bunch, the most in touch with the reality behind the curtain, but the Dudleys were still able to whip them into a hateful froth on a nightly basis. Its wrestlers were portrayed as hardcore rebels, yet many of the top ones flocked to the larger established groups, as soon as someone from those groups returned their calls. Its management positioned the company as anti-establishment, but Paul Heyman received money from the WWF for years, and there were stretches of time in which he was getting money from both WCW and the WWF (in fairness, all available evidence indicates that Heyman put that money into ECW, never spending it on himself).

If Heyman and ECW had enjoyed the financial resources of a WCW, their story might have ended much differently; it might not have ended at

all. Creatively, Heyman worked rings around most bookers.

ECW also positioned itself as the anti-WCW in many ways, but it succeeded in one key aspect. WCW was backed by a media conglomerate worth more than the entire pro wrestling industry of planet Earth. It had access to the top stars in the business and for a time could seemingly raid its major rival, the WWF, at will. WCW should have *never* died.

ECW, on the other hand, never really had a chance. As innovative as it was, in many ways, it was *never* profitable. And for all the kvetching (some of it very legitimate) about Paul Heymans business practices, a Fortune 500 worth of business acumen could not have kept ECW alive in the long run as a No. 3 promotion run on a budget that was minute compared to the WWF and WCW. ECW lost its top talent over and over until even Paul Heymans star-making ability could no longer keep up with the turnover. With the loss of TNN, the company's last best hope in 2000, the death of ECW was only a formality.

And once it was declared dead, only one thing remained—the fight over who would get the bloody remains.

CHAPTER 20

BANKRUPTCY

“In the three and a half years I’ve been running ECW I’ve told you to assume everything I say is a lie and to verify it. Seek the truth and verify.”

–PAUL HEYMAN IN A 1996
***PRO WRESTLING TOUCH* INTERVIEW**

WITH ALL OF THE ECW NOSTALGIA that was the talk of the wrestling world in 2005, there was much discussion of all of the pain the wrestlers endured to put on their hardcore matches.

One thing overlooked in all the misty-eyed memorials has been the amount of hurt ECW’s closure did, not only to suddenly unemployed wrestlers, but to companies who had provided services in good faith, only to find themselves holding five-figure (or more) lOUs that would never be paid.

On April 5, 2001, Paul Heyman began the process of identifying, in a New York federal bankruptcy court, the debts and assets of the HHG Inc. ECW was bankrupt, and plenty of people were owed large sums of money. Almost every deal ECW had made was a cash transfer in which Heyman sold shares of ECW’s future revenues in exchange for either cash or for lines of credit that Heyman quickly converted to cash and spent.

The WWF and Acclaim Entertainment, former partners, wound up as rivals for the few remaining assets of ECW. On April 16, five days after Heymans bankruptcy filing, attorneys for the WWF put up a $150,000 cash offer for the ECW intellectual property and the videotape library, the most potentially lucrative asset ECW had. The WWF claimed that offer actually totaled $737,500, because the purchase would also call for the WWF to forgive the $587,500 loan the company made to ECW around the same time the WWF was looking to supersede ECW as TNN’s wrestling provider.

However, Acclaim (through its subsidiary, Annodeus) claimed the right of first refusal, because the total amount ECW owed the game

company was $1,525,000, more than the $1,350,000 in total assets Heyman had claimed ECW had. Acclaim's interest also had a great deal to do with the fact that Acclaim was a secured creditor, unlike the WWF or many others. Under federal bankruptcy law, secured creditors (who make loans to entities who put up collateral) must be repaid before any money owed by a bankrupt entity goes to unsecured creditors.

Heyman's employment with WWF appeared to supersede any loyalty he might have felt to Acclaim for the million dollars ECW owed the video game company.

CRUNCHING NUMBERS

The bankruptcy filings were a real eye-opener, not only in the revelation of the six-figure loan from the WWF, but particularly for anyone who thought ECW had ever been a viable No. 3 in the U.S. wrestling scene.

ECW might have made noises about playing on the major stage, but financial records showed it more closely resembled a vanity project than a business aiming to earn a profit, and it seemed to run almost like a Ponzi scheme with constant money maneuverings that borrowed from a series of Peters to pay a series of Pauls (none of whom was Heyman). In its final years, even as ECW broke through on pay-per-view and national cable, it was bleeding money.

According to tax returns that were part of the bankruptcy filing, HHG Inc., ECW's parent corporation, lost $1.2 million in 1997, $1 million in 1998, and $3.5 million in 1999.

Of course, that $5.7 million total was just a drop of red ink compared to the $62 million WCW lost in 2000 alone, but WCW had the corporate might of the Time-Warner empire behind it. (Time-Warner had bought Turner Broadcasting in 1996 for $7.5 billion.) ECW had a few million from Heyman family trust funds. As it turned out, one of the main reasons ECW had survived as long as it had was Heyman had spent $3,751,929 of his own family's money to keep it rolling along for as long as it did.

However, that raises a question as to whether ECW was *ever* profitable, because there's still a difference of another $2 million lost even

before the beginning of 1997, the first year of major expansion efforts.

Many of those who had poured themselves into ECW for years ended up with nothing but the aforementioned lOUs. One of Heyman's claims to people seeking payment from ECW was that he was just waiting for the pay-per-view money to come in, and then everything would be fine.

"Fine" was probably overstating things, but the bankruptcy records do show ECW was owed $800,000 by the InDemand network alone.

Even the company's chief financial officer, Eugene Ciarkowski (who declined to be interviewed for this book) could not get the $153,000 ECW ended up owing him.

Pay-per-view director Michael Vettor was owed $2,800, and like many associated with the company, he did not get his money. Still, Vettor said the education he received was worth more than $2,800.

"ECW was not my bread and butter. More than anything, the bankruptcy depressed me because I wanted to see the project survive," Vettor said. "I never went after that money, because I just didn't think it was worth fighting for. I got a lot out of my time in ECW, not necessarily in terms of money. Ron Buffone became one of my best friends in life, and I learned so much about wrestling."

Not everyone who got stiffed on payments was as forgiving.

One of the companies that ECW left high and dry was the company that had literally lit up its shows for the previous couple of years.

BML Stage Lighting (www.bmlinc.com) had provided lighting for hundreds of WWF events in the mid-1990s, including three consecutive Wrestlemanias, before the WWF went with another company. BML eventually signed a deal with ECW to provide lighting for its events.

Heyman paid BML without a hitch early in the companies' relationship, but in 2001 ECW owed the lighting company five figures. More than four years later, however, BML's longest-remaining souvenir of its work with ECW is a debt note. Bankruptcy filings showed ECW owed BML $36,341, when ECW went belly up in 2001. Four years later, BML's owner said the company had seen "not one dime" of that amount, and it never will.

Although BML had provided stage and event lighting for concert tours such as the Allman Brothers Band for more than a decade, as well as various car shows, theatrical productions, and television shows, owner Eric

Todd said BML was not a big enough company to keep from flinching when he realized his five-figure bill for ECW would remain unpaid.

"That was a very painful hit for us to take," Todd said. "I mean, to this moment, if that check were to show up, it would be *very* nice. We're not some huge company, like WWE, where we could just absorb that and move on."

However, Todd also knows that check is not ever going to show up. Todd also said companies like BML were the ones hurt the most by debts the size of ECW's going unpaid.

"As an example, if a company owed McDonalds for 20,000 sodas that cost a dollar each, well, those sodas cost McDonalds about two cents each, so that's what they're stuck with. If a law firm gets stuck with a debt of 20 grand, that firms cash cost is actually about 30 cents on the dollar," Todd said. "With us, it was 75 percent paid out to get the crews out and the equipment, so we took that one on the chin pretty hard."

By Todd's math, Heyman's own legal team ended up out about $42,000, 30 percent of the $140,000 bankruptcy documents showed the lawyers were owed.

Todd said he even considered interjecting BML into the fight between the WWF and Acclaim for control of ECW's remaining assets.

"I think we could have made an argument that, but for the lighting, there would be no tapes," he said. "But with what it would have cost us to go after someone already in bankruptcy, it just wasn't worth the risk."

And then there were the wrestlers. This is only a partial listing of wrestlers and the amounts bankruptcy records say ECW owed (and still owes) them:

Justin Credible	*$7,990*	*Francine*	*$47,275*
Jazz	*$1,000*	*Little Guido*	*$25,000*
Balls Mahoney	*$4,000*	*Dawn Marie*	*$9,000*
Tom Marquez	*$500*	*Nova*	*$4,000*
Rhino	*$50,000*	*Roadkill*	*$21,250*
Super Crazy	*$5,000*	*Tajiri*	*$5,000*
Rob Van Dam	*$150,000*	*Jack Victory*	*$3,000*
Mikey Whipwreck	*$12,000*		

Jerry Lynn, New Jack, The Sandman, and Jim "Sinister Minister" Mitchell were among those whose amounts owed were listed as "unknown." "Irrelevant" might have been a better word, because regardless of what ECW owed its wrestlers, they would never get a nickel of it.

Among ECW's sea of red ink, totaling almost $8.9 million, was a $14,455 debt on the ring truck co-owned and driven by ECW's most loyal performer, Tommy Dreamer.

One of the most interesting listings was Sabu's, wherein Heyman listed "none" as the amount owed. To many, it appeared that listing could have sprung from nothing but spite, but others close to the situation said the listing was a legal necessity, because of the still-existing contract dispute between Sabu and Heyman.

The announcers did not escape the red ink of ECW, either. Don Callis ended up being owed $12,000, a bargain compared to the $50,480 owed the longtime voice of ECW, Joey Styles.

Some of the wrestlers had losses that exceeded the numbers that appeared on the court records. The bankruptcy documents showed that ECW owed C.W. Anderson $500, but Anderson said his ECW time cost him a great deal more than that.

"Man, I would say it was more like $40,000. My first year in ECW, I lost $21,000," Anderson said. "Here I was, making $75 a night, and I was the only one from [North Carolina], so I was driving by myself, and I was paying for my own hotels. No one would room with me at first, because no one knew me. The friends I had there were traveling with other people, although there were times I roomed with Corino and Jeff Jones.

"And I'll tell you something else. Jeff Jones was a prick. He made me sleep on the floor, but expected me to pay a full share for the room. Jones felt like he had earned a spot in the wrestling business that I hadn't, but he was nothing more than a glorified referee. I've always resented him for that."

Even fans were owed money. Like Joel Goodhart's Tri-State Wrestling promotion had years earlier, ECW sold season ticket packages to fans, guaranteeing the same seats to the most loyal patrons. Unlike Tri-State, when ECW went belly-up, fans didn't even get pennies on the dollar.

Philadelphia resident and longtime ECW fan Mike Aulthouse said he "got basically ripped off" for his purchases of ticket packages. Four years

later, he has still not *seen a* cent of the $200 ECW's bankruptcy papers stated the company owed him, nor will he ever see a cent.

"I just got a paper in the mail, basically saying, 'Sorry,'" he said.

LEGAL HANGUPS

The bankruptcy also meant that people with outstanding lawsuits against ECW would get nothing, regardless of whether their claims had merit.

The most famous suits were the ones that arose from the Erich Kulas assault and from the fan injured in the "fire chair" incident involving Funk, Foley, and the building blackout, but there were more.

At a 1998 event at the Pittsburgh Convention Center, John Lincoln and a friend were sitting in temporary bleachers that had been set up in the building. As Spike Dudley came down the walkway to the ring, they leaned over the railing to high-five him, and the railing collapsed.

Lincoln splattered onto the concrete floor and shattered his forearm.

"We were never able to piece together what happened, because John was carted off immediately," said Bedford, Pennsylvania, attorney Larry Lutz, who represented Lincoln. "We were never sure if the railing broke or if it came out of the slots in the wall."

On behalf of Lincoln, Lutz sued the building, the manufacturer of the railing, and ECW, as the entity putting on the event. The manufacturer blamed the crew employed by building management, which was exempt from being sued, because it was owned by the city and enjoyed immunity. And ECW went bankrupt.

Lincoln did lose mobility in his hand, Lutz said, but between governmental immunity and bankruptcy, the case petered out.

THE ULTIMATE DECISION

Acclaim and the WWF ultimately reached a settlement in 2003, which would result in Acclaim getting its money (or at least $2 million of it) and WWE getting the trademarks and tape library of ECW.

Heyman would ultimately lose his own shirt over ECW (not literally, as documents showed he retained about $500 worth of clothing), because he would file personal bankruptcy later.

CHAPTER 21

INVASION

“This invasion Just got taken to the extreme!”

—PAUL HEYMAN ON THE JULY 9, 2001, EDITION OF *WWF* RAW

ON MARCH 26, 2001, 15 days after the ECW pay-per-view that never happened and three weeks after Heymans debut as a WWF announcer, the few WCW fans who remained turned on *Monday Nitro* to find themselves greeted by the last man they thought they’d ever see—Vincent Kennedy McMahon.

McMahon gleefully told the WCW faithful that he had bought the company and now controlled the entire industry. ECW, which had not run a show in two months (and whose owner now worked full-time for McMahon), was in no position to argue.

The last episode of *Nitro* ended, ironically enough, with a lengthy plug for the Steve Austin-The Rock match at that year’s *Wrestlemania XVII*.

McMahon and the WWF braintrust did not want to pay the top-dollar contracts of the WCW stars whose presence would have made the WCW “invasion” a surefire success, so the “dream” feud was lacking main-event firepower on the WCW side. No offense to Booker T and “Diamond” Dallas Page, but they were no substitute for the star power of Bill Goldberg, Hulk Hogan, and Rie Flair (all of whom later ended up in WWE when their debuts meant far less than they would have as part of a WCW contingent).

With the invading forces needing a boost, McMahon played a card that was not entirely his to play—ECW Jim Ross welcomed viewers to the July 9, 2001, edition of *Monday Night Raw* by promising “one of the most unpredictable, unusual nights” in the programs history. To be sure, it was one of the busiest as the WWF’s creative team tried to resuscitate the dying WCW incursion by adding ECW to the mix and by packing what could have been four months of storyline into a single two-hour program. Ironically, the show that returned at least the name *ECW to* television was shot in Atlanta, Georgia, which had been the capital city of WCW.

In the shows very first match, WCW officially became a heel outfit with WCW “owner” Shane McMahon turning on The Undertaker. During the melee that followed, “Diamond” Dallas Page gave a Diamond-Cutter, his finishing move, to the Undertakers wife, Sara, who had been at ringside. The Undertaker ended up accompanying Sara to the hospital, meaning he would miss his scheduled match later that night against WCW’s Mike Awesome and Lance Storm.

In the second match, ECW alums the Dudley Boys lost the WWF tag titles to the Acolytes (including John “Bradshaw” Layfield, who would become a very vocal anti-ECW character a few years later). But Bubba (no longer Buh Buh) and D-Von were not done for the night.

With all of this going on, Olympic gold medalist Kurt Angle was backstage, wearing a child’s cowboy hat. It was a bit of comedy that would make it difficult for fans to believe Angle when he told Booker T, “I’m a dangerous man,” while challenging Booker for Booker’s WCW title that night.

Finally, it was time for The Undertakers match, which now featured Kane (substituting for his storyline “brother”) and Chris Jericho against Storm and Awesome. The WWF team seemed to have the match under control, when Tommy Dreamer and Rob Van Dam attacked Kane and Jericho, making it a four-on-two. A contingent of WWF wrestlers came to the ring, ostensibly to make the save. However, a savvy viewer could look at the crew (Taz, The Dudleys, Raven, Justin Credible, and Rhino) and figure out something was up. All the apparent rescuers had something in common with each other and with Awesome and Storm. Sure enough, the four-on-two turned into a gang assault on Jericho and Kane, as sporadic chants of “ECW!” erupted among pockets of the mixed crowd.

Heyman, who had been calling the action with Ross at ringside, cast off his headset, and got into the ring to announce that ECW was back.

Heyman delivered a promo that was reminiscent of the motivational speeches he used to give ECW performers backstage before events.

“It seems to me that these men were too extreme for WWF versus WCW!” he said.

Although many of the names were the same, this group was clearly ECW in name only, a reality that became unavoidable in the face of the egos that were at work.

OLD ALLIANCES

So much happened so quickly in the buildup of the show that nothing ended up standing out in the pay-per-view itself. Still, the *Invasion* pay-per-view drew about 775,000 total buys, double the audience the past few WWF shows had drawn, three times the audience of the typical WWE show in 2005, and more than 25 times the size of the audience most of ECW's pay-per-views pulled. Despite the botched buildup, this show was an almost unprecedented success. With the exception of a handful of Wrestlemanias, more fans watched *Invasion* than any other WWF/WWE pay-per-view—*ever*.

That pay-per-views twist was that Stone Cold Steve Austin, the WWF's top star, joined the WCW/ECW Alliance. Coupled with the storylines establishment of Stephanie McMahon, Vince's daughter, as "ECW owner," it quickly turned what could have been a historic battle between the last of the wrestling giants into just another version of the "McMahon versus McMahon" soap opera that the WWF had played to death over the previous two years.

With the Austin turn, the WWF programs stopped focusing on the in-ring battles between the WWF stars and the outsiders. Instead, *Raw* and *Smackdown!* seemed to become "The Steve Austin Show," and the WCW and ECW wrestlers were little more than window dressing or foils for Stone Cold.

The WCW/ECW combination became known simply as The Alliance in the weeks that followed, because it turned out the WWF did not yet have free and clear usage of the ECW initials. This further served to turn the anti-WWF group into just another bunch of heels. And then the WWF put Heyman back on commentary, ostensibly to be the voice of The Alliance. All this did was point more arrows to the fact that this was becoming just another storyline, instead of the special situation it could have been.

The September 11, 2001, *Smackdown!* taping in Houston ended up preempted by the most infamous terror attack of all time. When the show was held two nights later (airing live on the television network UPN), it was devoid of storylines, instead offering a "feel-good" night of babyface wins

and patriotic speeches. The attacks cast a pall over much of the country and its entertainment, including the WWF and The Alliance feud.

Even if all outside factors had been as kind as possible to the WWF versus The Alliance feud, the WWF braintrust seemed committed to screwing up what should have been a guaranteed moneymaker that could still have been an earner for McMahons company four years later. McMahons reluctance to bring in the high-dollar WCW marquee names meant he had to bolster that side with his own stars, and the ECW side of the house mostly consisted of guys who had been on the WWF's roster for months, and in a couple of cases for years.

Putting Stephanie McMahon in the figurehead ECW leader's position only acted as a slap in fans' faces as a clear reminder that this was not an intercompany feud to be taken seriously. WWF stars who were not willing to make The Alliance forces appear to be any kind of threat also contributed to the emasculation of the WCW/ECW team and took steam out of the feud. Most notably, WCW mainstay "Diamond" Dallas Page's feud with The Undertaker saw the WWF icon pummel Page at will, making him seem not like a threat, but a joke.

X-ED OUT

However, the fate of what should have been the biggest money program in wrestling history was sealed at the WWF's top levels when the company effectively made a decision to cut the legs out from under the invading forces, including the remnants of the ECW.

In spring 2001, just as WCW's failure was proving fatal, Vince McMahon was struggling with *his* most monumental failure—the XFL. Although McMahon seemingly had the golden touch when it came to pro wrestling, nearly every one of his promotional ventures outside of wrestling —a bodybuilding league, boxing matches on pay-per-view, Evel Knievel's jump over Snake River, a record label—had ended in calamity. Ironically, the wrestling junkheap was littered with the opposite—companies owned or run by people who had succeeded in other areas, but who could make nothing but money pits of their wrestling promotions.

WWF insiders said McMahon had seen the XFL, his venture into the world of pro football that launched in 2000, as the thing that would make him a mainstream entertainment mogul who would be remembered as more than “the wrestling promoter.” Indeed, some in the cable industry speculated that if the XFL had succeeded, McMahon would have ultimately owned his own cable network. Instead, the XFL was the most colossal bomb of his career, and its effects (aside from the $50 million McMahon lost on the league) were obvious to the people around him in the WWF.

By all accounts, McMahon was growing more isolated, more insular. One WWF insider said McMahon “listened to the people he should have ignored and ignored the people he should have listened to.”

Some in the company knew it was all going to fall apart early on. As the creative and production staffs met to discuss the invasion’s early stages, The Undertaker-Page feud came up. The Undertaker had wanted to mop the floor with Page, but some in the WWF argued that Page should put up a strong fight to make him seem more of a threat and, thus, a more viable player down the road.

McMahon apparently started to agree until WWF television director Kevin Dunn chimed in.

“There’s no way our audience will believe a WCW guy or an ECW guy can beat up a WWF guy,” Dunn told McMahon.

Dunn told McMahon that they had lost some of the audiences confidence when “the network screwed us” with the XFL, and he did not want to see the wrestling fans lose faith in the WWF, by presenting its stars as weak or vulnerable.

McMahon agreed with Dunn, and regardless of whether anyone in the WWF knew it, the biggest potential feud in wrestling history was doomed.

The WWF braintrust even seemed committed to making sure the invading stars did not get over even if the fans made it plain that they would support them. Exhibit A was Rob Van Dam, who quickly became the hottest performer in The Alliance, with his innovative maneuvers and cocky, laid-back demeanor (a marked difference from the “surly badass” persona that nearly everyone else in the WWF tried to convey). Instead of pushing Van Dam, in accordance with his incredible fan support, the WWF’s decision-makers were insulted that fans would cheer him and boo the WWF stars opposing him. They also decided that his unorthodox style was proof that he “did not know how to work,” a tag with which many

wrestlers who did not fit into the narrow style parameters of WWF wrestling had been saddled.

Jerry Lynn had made what appeared to be an auspicious WWF debut on April 29, 2001, pinning Crash Holly to win the company's light-heavyweight championship in his first match. Days later, however, he dropped the title and ended up wrestling in inconsequential opening matches. Lynn said he knew almost as soon as it started that the invasion would fail.

"I knew Vince's ego wouldn't let another name brand outdo the WWF brand, so I knew it wouldn't work," Lynn said. "People always ask if I was offended that I was not in the invasion angle. To be honest, my feelings were hurt a little bit that no one even asked, but if they had asked, I wouldn't have wanted to be in it."

By the time November 200 l's *Survivor Series* ended the feud with the WWF triumphing over The Alliance in a final big tag match, The Alliance was nothing but a generic heel faction. If ECW wasn't already long dead, *Survivor Series* unplugged the respirator that had been keeping the brain-dead body alive only in the most technical of senses.

CHAPTER 22

WHERE THEY ENDED UP

“you’re fiiiiiiiired!”

–VINCE MCMAHON ON TOO MANY EPISODES OF *RAW TO* COUNT

AFTER TOPPLING EVERY OTHER PROMOTION in U.S. wrestling, Vince McMahon lost his company’s name to a panda bear. The World Wildlife Fund won an injunction in London, barring the World Wrestling Federation from using the WWF initials for commercial purposes. Thus, in June 2002, the company became World Wrestling Entertainment, or WWE.

That same month and a year after WCW folded, a new wrestling company started—Total Nonstop Action. Only a few months after TNA’s June 2002 debut, Panda Energy put some of its massive resources behind TNA. The promotion had lost more than $20 million (or nearly three times ECW’s total losses) in its first three years of operation, but executives said they were in it for the long haul, and signs of profitability seemed not far off, as of the end of 2005. In an ironic turn, WWE’s five-year contract with Spike TV (the former TNN) ended acrimoniously with the network announcing months in advance that WWE would not be on the network past the September 2005 end of their existing deal. The announcement crippled WWE’s bargaining power, and the company ended up returning to the USA Network for a deal much worse than the one the WWF had left behind to bolt to TNN in the first place.

Spike TV tried to market TNA wrestling to the audience WWE attracted, moving TNA’s *Impact* program to Thursday nights in prime time starting in November 2006.

A month before that, TNA scored its biggest talent coup to date when Kurt Angle debuted. The 1996 Olympic gold-medal wrestler had left WWE under disputed circumstances. In various interviews, Angle himself even told conflicting stories about his WWE departure. People close to Vince McMahon said Angle, who had failed two separate drug tests in 2006,

refused to take time off to heal various injuries. Angle also wasn't happy when McMahon moved him to WWE's relaunch of ECW in the same year.

TNA's story is almost enough to make one wonder how differently ECW's story would have ended if someone had put enough money and patience into it.

Jerry Lynn, who has worked off and on for TNA since its 2002 inception, said the company continued to surprise people by surviving and growing slowly.

"The Jarretts (the father-and-son tandem who cofounded TNA) have been around for a long time, and they're fighters," Lynn said. "They've pulled the rabbit out of the hat more than once. I find it amazing how naysayers will sit around and complain about having just WWE to watch and then knock someone else who tries to offer an alternative. And they are an alternative. The last thing TNA should want is to copy WWE, because I can't stand to watch the crap they do. I think what people want to see is more action."

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

TOD GORDON made occasional independent appearances in the years following ECW's demise and became a key player in the *Forever Hardcore* DVD and the *Hardcore Homecoming* shows. In 2005, he was working on a book about his experiences, and he promised to tell drug and sex stories, naming names.

BEDLAH stayed out of the wrestling business and married Tom "Tommy Dreamer" Laughlin on October 12, 2002. She returned for the 2006 WWE pay-per-view, *ECW One Night Stand*, and even treated fans to a "CATFIGHT! CATFIGHT!" with WWE star Lita, who seconded Edge and Mick Foley on the show against ECW stalwarts Dreamer and Terry Funk. Beulah has not appeared publicly since, taking *One Night Stand* literally.

JOHNNY GIUNGE wrestled occasionally, but a heart attack claimed Ted "Rocco Rock" Petty, putting an end to Public Enemy September 21, 2002. Petty had wrestled at one independent show that night and was en

route to another when the attack hit. Petty was engaged, his wedding set for October.

MIKE AWESOME, who unseated Taz only to be unseated by Taz, did not last in the WWF for much longer than the 2001 invasion angle. Since his WWF departure, he has concentrated his wrestling endeavors in Japan, where he has tried to rebuild his image from the damage the "Fat Chick Thriller" and "That '70s Guy" gimmicks did to his reputation as a killer. While he and Masato Tanaka stole the show at the 2005 version of WWE's *ECW One Night Stand*, he was not invited back in 2006.

STEWE CORINO made a niche for himself on the independent scene and with occasional tours of Japan.

After a decade of writing magazine articles, taking pictures, and helping out behind the scenes, **DON LAIBLE** has little interest in wrestling. Much of the reason is the content ("Its just not the wrestling I grew up on, you know?"), but he has another, more personal reason.

"One of the things that chased me away was all guys I knew who were dropping like flies, all at young ages," he said.

THE DUDLEYS, Bubba and D-Von, enjoyed steady work with the WWF until summer 2005. Head writer Stephanie McMahon heard that one of them had remarked that she had no idea what she was doing. The statements accuracy, if he even said it, didn't matter. Both ended up gone—one because of what he (might have) said, one because he was the others partner. Neither was fired, but their contracts were not renewed.

Weeks after their departure, in an almost supernaturally arrogant display of pettiness, WWE sent a threatening letter to Mark LaMonica and Devon Hughes, better known as Bubba and D-Von, promising legal action if they continued using the Dudley names. Heyman had trademarked the name in ECW, and when LaMonica and Hughes went to the WWF in 1999, Heyman transferred the trademark to the WWF as well. However, they had been told at the time that the marks would only be held by the WWF for as long as the team worked there.

The claim by WWE seemed odd, because in its effort to secure the ECW assets in the 2001 bankruptcy fight with Acclaim, the lawyers for the then-WWF asserted that the ECW trademarks had no value.

The team went to TNA as Team 3-D, Brother Ray and D-Von (as a takeoff on Devon Hughes' real name, to which Vince McMahon could not own rights). There, they found a niche as a hard-working tag team that

never left fans wanting for brutal action. They alternated between TNA and Japan, where they became one of the more popular American acts.

Legal threats aside, the Dudleys had fared extraordinarily well in the WWF (later WWE) compared to most of the ECW stars who ended up there. For many of them, it must have seemed as if some sort of anti-Heyman was booking them, accentuating their shortcomings and doing nothing to build up their strengths.

Another wrestler threatened over his ring name was **PETER "JUSTIN CREDIBLE" POLANCO**. WWE also claimed to own that name, as it originated in the ECW, whose marks WWE now owned.

Credible had spent a forgettable stint of nearly two years in the WWF before being released in January 2003. He has since made a few appearances for TNA, but has stopped wrestling regularly.

His ECW partner fared no better. **LANCE STORM**, one of the most fluid and graceful athletes ever to perform in ECW, got a good push in the dying WCW, but later received the gimmick of being "boring" in WWE, which ensured that fans would pelt him with that chant at every opportunity. He retired from full-time wrestling in 2005, opening a wrestling school.

JERRY LYNN came into the WWF in 2001, as the invasion angle was in full swing, but was never even asked about becoming a part of it.

At one point, Lynn got to wrestle his main ECW rival, Rob Van Dam, for an episode of *WWF Sunday Night Heat*. Unfortunately, the match would not be one of the 20-minute opuses ECW fans saw, but a short TV match. Heyman, now part of WWF creative, got them nine minutes in the ring (the original plan was for five), and the two tore down the house.

Lynn said he knew he was finished in the WWF when he saw the edited match on television.

"They edited out all my offense," he said. "The whole thing was to showcase Rob."

Lynn wrestled a few more unremarkable months in the WWF before being released under the worst possible circumstances.

"They fired me while I was recovering from knee surgery, an injury I'd suffered working for them. Its always your goal to get to the so-called big time," said Lynn. "It's a shame once you get there, it's a dismal atmosphere. If I had a company, I think I'd want my employees to be happy, but there it was like they actively wanted their employees to be unhappy. It's a sick,

sick mentality. I've seen them stir up shit in the locker room just to get guys backstabbing each other."

Jerry Lynn still remembers ECW fondly, bounced paychecks and all.

"As far as a job, it was the best time I ever had," Lynn said. "For all the problems and all the B.S., it was amazing, and if I had it to do over again, I'd do it all again."

YOSHIHILO TAJIRI joined the WWF in May 2001, not long after the dissolution of ECW. He bounced between a babyface and a heel, but was continually saddled with ridiculous gimmicks. In fact, he declined to become part of a faction of wrestlers based on Japanese mobsters. Tajiri, as familiar with the real-life Yakuza as many Americans are with organized crime in the States, refused to take part in something that could be viewed as an affront.

Tajiri asked for and was given his release from WWE in December 2005 and returned to his native Japan, where he planned on a career as a journalist. He also continued wrestling for some of Japans smaller promotions and returned to the United States for what appeared to be one final showing. In June 2006, he teamed with longtime rival Super Crazy in a loss to the Full-Blooded Italians (Little Guido and Tony Mamaluke) on WWE's *ECW One Night Stand* pay-per-view.

RAVEN, who made his name as the master of dark psychological promos, was all but muzzled in the WWF. While working for the McMahons, he won the hardcore title 26 times, which is probably higher than the number of times he got to speak on-camera during his stint.

He also left the WWF when the company released him in January 2003. Raven had seemed to be at the start of an intriguing storyline in the WWF more than once, only to have his storyline abruptly cut off.

"[The WWF] wanted Raven, and I was clean and off drugs, but Jim Ross told me they couldn't give me a big deal, because what if I had a relapse? I said I didn't need a big deal; all I wanted was an opportunity," Raven said. "And at that point, I could have gotten a retirement deal, I mean, money good enough to retire on from WCW, because [Vince] Russo was begging me to go back there. I could have been world champion there or written my own ticket, but for personal reasons of pride, I always wanted to make it in New York."

Unfortunately, that was not in the cards.

“Of course, I didn’t make it, but ultimately that was because they couldn’t use me right,” Raven said. “All signs at that time pointed to me being given a shot, because of the big war between WCW and them, but about the same time I started in the WWF, the war was about over, and I kind of ended up being the first casualty of the war being over. Now you see guys all the time who go there and don’t get a shot, but I was really the first one who didn’t.”

After leaving WWE, Raven went to TNA, where he became a featured player by late 2006, again leading a burgeoning “flock” of heels.

In 2005, Raven was a big part of the *Forever Hardcore* documentary DVD and the *Hardcore Homecoming* shows. The other documentary, WWE’s *The Rise and Fall of ECW*, provided the impetus for Heyman and Raven to repair the relationship that had been damaged five years earlier.

“He really put me over in that DVD,” Raven said. “He basically said I was one of his favorite performers, so I sent him an email. I told him, 1 know you’re not gonna respond to this, since we haven’t really spoken in five years, but I wanted to say thanks for what you said. And without you I never would have been able to accomplish what I accomplished.’ And he actually responded to me, and we patched things up.”

KONNAN also is now one of the stars of NWA-TNA and back working on top in Mexico, but he still remembers the tumultuous 1990s.

“The worst time of my career was WCW, and some of the best was ECW,” he said. “The camaraderie was just great. The locker room in TNA is a lot like that locker room in ECW. The guys stick together.”

New England promoter **PAUL RICHARD** now works for a newspaper as the supervisor of automobile advertising.

“Its great,” he said. “No more concussions from getting hit over the head with chairs.”

JIM CROCKETT sells real estate in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. As of early 2007, the wrestling world *still* awaits word on the rescheduling of the WNN television tapings.

In 2005, pay-per-view director **MICHAEL VETTOR** started directing, among other things, NWA-Total Nonstop Action. Vettor said his time in ECW was invaluable to his TNA efforts. He credited ECW’s television team of Charlie Bruzzese and Ron Buffone with helping him understand pro wrestling, which he characterized as completely different than any other sport in terms of television presentation.

“Ron, I think the world of,” Vettor said. “He’s one of most talented, hardworking guys I’ve ever met. ECW was a learning experience for me. Here I was, coming in with all this TV experience into wrestling, and it was an education to me. Kudos to Ron Buffone, because, yes, I had the experience to do live TV, but when you’re doing a TV sporting event on a basketball court, the action is flowing up and down the court. With wrestling, you had to figure out if it’s a tag match, if the guys are going outside of the ring, and what the most important part of the match was. It’s the psychology of wrestling—guys are in the ring, creating a storyline, and you’d better capture the important moments.”

Still, Vettor said, wrestling would always be a challenge.

“I actually have a passion for it now,” Vettor said. “I have a blast, and it’s honestly more challenging than anything else I do, because you’ve got to understand what the story is, and if you miss it, you’ve failed to cover that particular match.”

Vettor said he would be rooting for TNA to make it even if he were not attached to it.

“Wrestling needs more than Vince,” he said.

After years of being told that he lacked the physique to work for WWE or TNA, **C.W. ANDERSON** briefly ended up as part of WWE’s “ECW” relaunch in 2006.

“WWE liked my work, but didn’t like my body,” Anderson said in 2005. “TNA told me the same thing; I had the best match on the card and was told my body wasn’t in shape. I did a match in Charlotte, where I wrestled Chris Masters in WWE before he started getting his big push. I got to the back, and Chris Benoit was waiting back there. He told me how good the match was and how he couldn’t understand how I didn’t have a job there. You know, bodybuilders have their own shows on ESPN 2. I think we ought to leave wrestling to the wrestlers. For years, guys who didn’t look like bodybuilders made people think they were badasses because of the way they approached it and the way they worked.”

Anderson (who can be found online at www.ecwanderson.com) did work to streamline his physique and was taking nutritional supplements to help his cause (although not the supplements many of wrestling’s muscular, acne-riddled stars employ). One nearly killed him in September 2005. Anderson became jaundiced and was unable to hold down food for weeks.

“I was taking supplements from GNC, and they caused my liver to stop working,” he said. “I almost had to have a liver transplant, and my doctor told me I almost died.”

Anderson was on his way to recovery in late 2005, but said he had a message for people who supplement.

“Sometimes, those things are not everything they’re cracked up to be,” Anderson said. “If I could say one thing, it would be that people do a little research on anything they’re planning to take. Ask your doctor, or whatever.”

AXL ROTTEN continued to work independents, and he and Ian had a rematch of their Taipei Death Match of a decade earlier at the November 5, 2005 final *Hardcore Homecoming* show. Ian opened up his own independent group, IWA Mid-South Wrestling.

JACK WICTORY got out of wrestling altogether and got on a different side of the television business, as a DirecTV distributor in Florida, before getting into another line of sales. He got into selling hurricane shutters, and from all accounts, business is booming.

MICI FOLEY went on to become Mankind in the WWF. Within four years of his arrival, he was one of the most popular wrestlers in history, as well as a best-selling author. His autobiography has paved the way for every wrestling book since (including the one you’re reading right now), shattering the book industry’s myth that wrestling fans don’t read. His book, *Have a Nice Day*, spent weeks atop *The New York Times* best-seller list. Foley retired from active wrestling in 2000, but still makes occasional WWF appearances. As of the end of 2006, he had written two non-fiction books, two novels, and a series of children’s books.

THE PITBULLS made independent appearances until death broke up the team in September 2003. Durante and girlfriend Diane Hulsey were found dead in their Rhode Island home. Autopsies later showed that Hulsey had died of an overdose of painkillers and alcohol, while Durante had overdosed on the prescription painkiller fentanyl. Their deaths received a fair amount of area media coverage, because police also found the couples 21-month-old son and eight-month-old daughter in the house. The children had apparently been trapped in the house with their parents’ bodies for days. Durante was 36.

NEW JACK also continued to work on the independent scene. In October 2004, he was arrested in Georgia and charged with aggravated

battery for drawing an opponent's blood in a match that ended up even bloodier than New Jacks encounter with Mass Transit.

MIKEY WHIPWRECK wrestled in independents before getting out of wrestling altogether in 2002, although he did return for both competing reunion shows in June 2005.

Between them, **CHRIS BENOIT** and **EDDY GUERRERO** went on to hold nearly every championship in WWE, and their continued popularity confounded people who thought both were too short to make it big. For Guerrero, who won the WWE championship from Brock Lesnar in February 2005, glory was short-lived, as was Guerrero himself. On November 13, 2005, Eddy Guerrero was found dead in a Minneapolis hotel room. He was 38.

Autopsy records would later show heavy drug use played a major role in his death.

The autopsy report from the Hennepin County, Minnesota, medical examiners office cited oversized organs, including an enlarged heart, "with a history of anabolic steroid use" as "significant conditions" that contributed to the heart disease that killed Guerrero. The report also noted "chronic pain with recent narcotic medication use."

PERRY SATURN, who was bounced out of WWE in 2003, suffered a serious neck injury in June 2005 and had to miss the scheduled reunion of The Eliminators at *Hardcore Homecoming* in Philadelphia.

JOEL GERTNER has been attending college in hopes of becoming a broadcast journalist.

SHANE DOUGLAS spent several unhappy (but well-paid) months in WCW before being caught in a power shift when Kevin Sullivan replaced Vince Russo as booker in 2000. Sullivan had personal conflicts with Chris Benoit, who had married Sullivans former wife, Nancy (ex-ECW manager Woman). Benoit and fellow ECW alum Dean Malenko, Eddy Guerrero, and Perry Saturn bolted for the WWF. At one point, Douglas was to go with them, but they made a deal without him, leaving Douglas stranded. Douglas tried to make a go of it, but WCW was too far gone. Douglas went to TNA, where he managed the tag-team The Naturals and, as an agent, helped young talent develop.

In early 2006, Douglas took a step that required more guts and toughness than any bump he took in ECW—he admitted he had a problem with painkillers and sought treatment. Years of hits and hard landings had

left him dependent on prescription painkillers. Instead of becoming one of wrestling's too-frequent casualties, however, he successfully completed a three-month rehab program and went public with his struggle upon his return to TNA. By facing his problem and discussing it openly, Shane Douglas proved his grit and integrity. In a business built on lies and deceit, Douglas faced the truth for the sake of his family and stands as an example to anyone willing to acknowledge it.

PAUL HEYMAN stayed with WWE, although the relationship remained fraught with ups and downs.

Ranjan Chhibber is an assistant professor of honors and film studies at George Washington University. He was also an ECW fan in the mid-1990s who later got to work with Heyman when both were members of WWE's creative team for three months in 2004.

Chhibber said he could not discuss particulars of creative meetings or of particular ideas, but he did say that Heyman was an odd fit with the other members of the writing team, which included everything from ex-wrestlers to people with television experience, but no wrestling background.

"I learned the ropes from him," Chhibber said. "I had been a big fan of ECW, so I gravitated toward him. His booking style agreed with my vision of what wrestling should be—more intensive versus all the gimmicks. He was a good mentor to me. He didn't have to take me under his wing, but he did."

Chhibber said that the real Paul Heyman was very different from the overbearing zealot he appeared to be on television.

"I hate to sound like a mark, but I couldn't believe how brilliant this guy was," Chhibber said. "He was reading books by [Princeton University religion and African-American studies professor] Cornell West when none of the other writers knew who that was. I imagine it was unusual to see—here was this passionate liberal surrounded by very conservative Republicans in WWE for a couple of hours every day, and he would debate the others, especially right before the 2004 presidential election. This was a guy who could ve debated professors. He defeated everybody in the room in the two hours they were together. And Paul was not the politically correct liberal that's become the cliché, but he genuinely was a very caring person."

Other people, ones who dealt with him in his ECW days, saw Heyman less as a caring person than a liar, a con man. Still others saw Heyman first and foremost as a creative genius who revolutionized the wrestling

business. Heyman's passion eventually led to his ouster from the writing team. He crafted a three-way feud (including the teams of Chris Benoit and Kurt Angle, Chavo and Eddy Guerrero, and Edge and Rey Misterio) on *Smackdown!*, creating genuine buzz, but he soon ran afoul of another McMahon—Stephanie.

Vince McMahons daughter grew up around wrestling and seemed to be the one groomed to someday take over her fathers company. According to people working behind the scenes, she also loved to display ruthlessness, one of her father's most valued traits.

Starting in 2001, Heyman also displayed a trait the elder McMahon claimed to have valued—honesty. Surrounding McMahon was a cadre of yes-men, people only too happy to tell him how brilliant every one of his ideas was. Heyman was not the only one close to McMahon willing to be brutally honest, but he was among the most vocal.

By 2003, Stephanie and Heyman were already at cross-purposes. As head writer, she apparently believed that Heyman was moving things in directions that were not necessarily her directions. Heyman appeared to believe that Stephanie had no concept of the business into which she had been born.

Their conflict came to a head in a writers meeting when Stephanie McMahon told Heyman about a segment she wanted on an upcoming show. The idea was one Vince McMahon himself had shot down, and Heyman told her that for that reason, he did not want to do it.

Her response, according to one WWE insider, was, "You can put it in there, or *I'll* put it in there."

Heyman said that if those were his choices, he would prefer she put her pet segment into the show so he would not have to explain to her father, the company chairman, why he had violated Vince McMahons edict.

Stephanie grew flustered and began to tell Heyman, "Paul, if I were you—

Heyman cut her off and reportedly said, "But you're not me, because you've never built anything up from scratch, you've never had to fight back for your very survival, so you're definitely not—"

This time, it was Stephanie's turn to cut off Heyman, as she appeared to become her shrieking television character, leaning right into Heyman's face and screaming, "Shut up!"

Heyman looked at her and said, "Fuck off."

As if daring Heyman to repeat the epithet that had stunned the rest of the writing staff into silence, Stephanie said, “Excuse me?”

Heyman asked her which of his two words she had been unable to discern, and she stormed out of the room.

The next day, Heyman found himself in another meeting with Stephanie and a WWE human resources executive. Shortly thereafter, Heyman found himself explaining the heated exchange to Vince McMahon himself. Heyman reminded McMahon that the WWE chairman would never stand for someone getting in his face as Stephanie had gotten into Heymans. Ultimately Heyman admitted to McMahon that he should not have said what he did. However, he told McMahon, that was only because he had meant to tell Stephanie to go fuck herself when “Fuck off.” came out instead.

To the surprise of no one, Heyman found himself off the writing team. He would go on to have brief stints both in front of the camera (playing the role of *Smackdown!* general manager, ironically replacing Stephanie McMahon in the on-air position in a role similar to the one Tod Gordon had played in ECW) and behind the scenes.

After providing the blueprint for the *ECW: One Night Stand* pay-per-view in June 2005, Heyman was sent to Louisville, Kentucky, to write television for Ohio Valley Wrestling, one of WWE’s feeder circuits for trainees. Heyman replaced Jim Cornette, whose career as an in-ring manager and upstart promoter Heymans oddly mirrored in many ways. Some in the industry saw the move as a final slap in the face from the McMahon family, but Heyman turned it into a feather in his cap, making Ohio Valley the best booked wrestling show in the country. By late 2005, *Raw* and *Smackdown!* were unwatchable as often as not, but for viewers in the area, Ohio Valley was must-see wrestling TV. As if raising a middle finger to all critics of his booking, Heyman built programs that quickly led to increases in both crowd size and crowd fervor, proving he could book successfully without a cutting-edge production duo and without the monstrous talent budget of WWE.

Heyman played a major role in WWE’s attempt to revive ECW as a brand name in 2006. If youre dying to read how that turned out, skip to Chapter 26.

TERRY FUNK continued to work in the independents after a final WCW stint in 2000, which he accepted to help old friend Kevin Sullivan,

the beleaguered booker. In 2004, he co-authored (with some newspaper guy from Texas) his autobiography, *Terry Funk: More Than Just Hardcore*.

In 2006, he sold the Double Cross Ranch, his home for decades. He and Vicki Funk, his wife and the love of his life, relocated to a smaller house by a nearby lake. He was taking fewer and fewer wrestling gigs, and his retirement looked like it might finally take. However, he resurfaced one more time in 2006, hoping to give one last boost to ECW and one last memorable performance to the "crazy fans" he loved so well.

SABU bounced around wrestling's independent leagues before facing one of his toughest battles against a sciatic nerve injury. In late 2004, a man so tough he once taped his broken jaw shut so he could finish a match found himself all but immobilized in a hospital bed for nearly two months. Benefit shows held to raise money for his hospital bills drew some of the top independent workers in the country and raised thousands, showing the respect he commanded among wrestlers.

At one point, Sabu had lost about 40 pounds, but battled back to full health, as he had battled back from debilitating injury countless times before. Sabu was (and as of 2006 still is) known as one of the people in wrestling who is all heart. Sometimes, that heart seemed to lead him astray, but no one could dispute that he gave the fans everything he had every time he jumped into the ring.

Historically, Sabu might never get the credit he deserves for being the trendsetting wild man whose aerial stunts ushered in an entire genre of wrestling in ECW and later throughout the wrestling industry in the United States. You can argue about whether that influence was positive, but nobody should *ever* doubt Sabu's toughness.

Sabu would also play a pivotal role in WWEs 2006 ECW model ...

CHAPTER 23

EXTREME NOSTALGIA

“Shut the fuck up! [clap-clap-clap-clap-clap]”

–ECW FANS TO WWE ANNOUNCERS JONATHAN COACHMAN AND MICHAEL COLE AT THE *EXTREME HEAT* PRESHOW FOR ECW: ONE *NIGHT STAND* ON JUNE 12, 2005

BY 2004, WWE HAD PUT TOGETHER A STRING OF SUCCESSFUL DVDS aimed at fans who were not necessarily the company’s current fan base. DVD histories of Rie Flair and the 1990s WWE-WCW rivalry had been big successes, and Vince McMahon was ready to put his recently acquired ECW footage to use for a DVD that would chronicle, as the title put it, *The Rise and Fall of ECW*.

Rise and Fall documented ECW’s history through a WWE lens, which meant, among other things, WCW was the bad guy of the story. When ECW stars departed for the WWF (which all of the interviewees had to call WWE, lest they risk the environmentalists’ wrath), that was Vince McMahon giving them chances to become superstars. When stars jumped to WCW, that was WCW “raiding” ECW’s talent base.

Many aspects of the WWF-ECW relationship never came up, particularly the proximity of McMahon’s $587,500 to his taking the TNN slot, a move that erased any doubts about ECW’s impending doom. *Rise and Fall* portrayed McMahon as an unseen angel who only tried to help ECW.

Of course, Heyman’s and Gordon’s dealings with WCW were never mentioned at all. Still, the documentary was a more accurate, complete picture than many associated with ECW had thought it would be with ECW and Heyman getting credit for many of their innovations.

The phenomenal sales of *The Rise and Fall of ECW* (available in stores or at shopzone.wwe.com) justified a new ECW project, and as an idea from Rob Van Dam, that project took shape as the pay-per-view *ECW: One Night Stand*.

CAPITALIZING ON ECW

Van Dam, then sidelined with a knee injury, suggested to McMahon that WWE try an ECW pay-per-view The idea wound its way through the WWE creative staff, who at one point wanted no involvement from Heyman, still smarting over his head-butting encounters with Stephanie McMahon. Eventually, Vince McMahon himself insisted on Heymans participation.

McMahon sent Heyman a memo, asking what his concerns would be about doing such a show. Heyman responded that his top priorities would be ensuring that WWE got clearances to use the music that was such a key part of entrances like The Sandman's. He also advised WWE not to get involved in a pissing match against whoever popped up to promote an ECW reunion show without WWE involvement, although that bit of advice was apparently ignored.

Vince McMahon called Heyman into the corporate office in Connecticut where Heyman reportedly heard WWE creative's ideas for the ECW show. Whatever that pitch was, Heyman did not appear to believe they captured it, and within days, Heyman had three possible scripts for the *One Night Stand* show.

The build for the show began in May with ECW ads appearing on *Monday Night Raw*. This led to a storyline in which Eric Bischoff (now merely a performer, playing the role *of Raw* general manager) tried to squash the effort. Yes, just as WWE's fictionalized histories painted Bischoff as the villain of the piece, Bischoff would now play the anti-ECW villain on television.

This culminated with a segment on *Raw*, in which McMahon, Heyman, and Bischoff all confronted each other in the ring. Some ECW fans blanched at the thought of McMahon, who did as much as anyone to harm ECW (although he also did plenty to help it over the years), making money off of a new ECW show. However, other members of that small core of fans believed they were witnessing history and soon geared up for the rebirth, even if it would be a brief one, of the wrestling they had loved. And some of the elements of the angle were real, which was reminiscent of ECW itself.

“I thought it was great when they had all three of the main promoters of the 1990s in the ring at the same time,” John “Hat Guy” Bailey said. “I thought it was great, the way they talked about the way Bischoff had raided ECW. It was exciting to watch, because some of what they were talking about was legitimate.”

Others were less impressed.

Even with *The Rise and Fall* DVD, Konnan said Vince McMahon’s company was not giving ECW its just due historically speaking.

“It’s really a shame when I hear, especially WWE, trying to rewrite history,” he said. “Without ECW, wrestling might still be full of stupid gimmicks. I really believe ECW made the WWF and WCW change the way they presented characters. You know how, like in the 1980s, you used to turn on the TV sometimes and be embarrassed if wrestling was on and you had friends over? When I would watch ECW and have friends in the house, they were like, Whoa!’ ECW made it believable, even when they had skits. It’s not fairly viewed. I mean it’s a shame that ECW was responsible for [WWE’s] second best-selling DVD of all time, and it gets nothing else besides a one-night-only pay-per-view? It’s ridiculous.”

WWE advertised the event with posters all over New York City, among other places. Many of the ads featured ECW players who had not yet committed to the WWE event, including some who WWE officials had to know would not be appearing.

WWE’s marketing of its ECW pay-per-view rankled some of the people who had broken their bodies wrestling for the real thing, seeing what WWE was doing as cashing in on their work without paying them a nickel. Some of them were already hot about being slighted in the WWE video documentary, *The Rise and Fall of ECW*.

WRITING THEIR OWN HISTORY

This discontent would drive a group of people to put together a documentary and a reunion show of their own.

Shane Douglas said the seeds for *Hardcore Homecoming* and its companion production, *Forever Hardcore*, took root in 2004 when he sat

down to watch *The Rise and Fall of ECW*.

"What I saw appeared to be a promotional tool for WWE to promote its version of ECW's history," Douglas said. "They did a very good job on some of the finer points of the business dealings involved. The thing is I was a history teacher for five years, and what I couldn't stand was a history lesson that was just date to date to date. I liked a history teacher who gave anecdotes, stories, and sidebars. I think *Vince s* ECW history was date to date, almost like Cliff's Notes."

Douglas decided to get the ball rolling on a video documentary that would fill in the holes left in *The Rise and Fall of ECW*.

"There were some major voices that were unheard," Douglas said, citing himself, Terry Funk, Sabu, The Sandman, and Joey Styles.

"No disrespect to Taz and those guys, but they were the guys who were handed the ball from us. Vince's version would be tantamount to making a documentary on the making of *The Godfather* and not talking to the producer, the director, or Marlon Brando. I felt it was incumbent on me to put out the complete story as well as for the fans who loved that company."

That complete story would be *Forever Hardcore*, a documentary that featured those main players, plus Konnan, New Jack, and WCW official Terry Taylor. Former WWF and WCW writer Vince Russo also appeared and talked about how influential ECW was on the WWF's "Attitude" campaign of the late 1990s, in which that company's shows got edgier and more violent.

Douglas said *Forever Hardcore* stood on its own, not as the other side of WWE's *The Rise and Fall*.

"We didn't want it to be the counterpoint, and that's not what it is. It's a more complete story," he said.

And it stands up as a more balanced, multifaceted look at ECW's main players and their interactions with the "Big Two," although it also comes across much less a history of ECW than as a series of anecdotes about the participants. Also, this being pro wrestling, a couple of agendas came into play, most notably a stronger anti-Heyman bent than *The Rise and Fall* contained. That much might be understandable, given how many of the people featured either had bitter partings with Heyman or ended up with him owing them huge sums of money.

Copies of *Forever Hardcore* went on sale the night of June 10 (the DVD is available at (www.foreverhardcore.net) when the doors opened for

the reunion show *Hardcore Homecoming*. The show was also billed as an "extreme reunion" early on, but WWE legal squashed that.

ONE LAST SHOW (OR MORE)

Shane Douglas said the idea for the *Hardcore Homecoming* show was not a new one, but it was something he knew he *had* to do, after seeing WWE profiting off of ECW. Douglas had seen Vince McMahons company as one of ECW's destroyers, and when he heard WWE was planning an ECW pay-per-view, he knew he could wait no longer.

"It was an idea that had been kicked around to me for years, and while I had promoted shows in the past, I had never thought it was the right time to do an ECW reunion," he said. "I never wanted it to seem like I was just trying to capitalize on it for a quick payday, but when Vince did the business he did with *The Rise and Fall* DVD, we started hearing overtures about WWF, or WWE I guess we have to call it now, doing a pay-per-view."

Douglas said the thing that clinched his desire to put on a show was finding out that WWE's initial plans were to use only currently contracted WWE stars who had been in ECW.

"That really kind of outraged me, not for my sake, because Fve been very public that 111 never work for Vince again," Douglas said. "But guys like Benoit and Malenko were footnotes in ECW history, and that's not an insult to those guys, but I thought it was important that the people who went down with the company and the ones who lost money got a chance to profit from a show like that."

Douglas said he was also concerned McMahon's pay-per-view would end up doing more to "piss on ECW's legacy" than to glorify it. The handling of the 2001 invasion angle showed that Douglas had a reason to be worried.

"I felt very strongly that if there was one thing we could count on, it would be that Vince's arrogance was so off the charts that he was going to screw it up," Douglas said. "I felt like it was up to me if I didn't want him to have the reins to demean it."

Jerry Lynn, who shared Douglas' beliefs about how McMahon would handle an ECW revival, was eager to take part in *Hardcore Homecoming*.

"I loved the idea, because I knew we'd do it right," Lynn said.

Tracy Smothers said he got a call about *Hardcore Homecoming* early one Saturday.

"Shane was all over the way Vince was promoting his show and said that was why he was doing this," Smothers said. "In a way, it kind of came out of nowhere, but I loved it."

The *Hardcore Homecoming main* event would be a reprise of the match that put the three-way dance on the map in wrestling and was one of ECW's most famous matches—the 1994 battle of Shane Douglas versus Terry Funk versus Sabu.

Douglas said he found the idea of re-creating one of his most memorable matches somewhat daunting.

"At first, I stayed 10 miles away from that match, because I'm in good shape for 41, but I'm not 30 anymore," he said. "Obviously, we're all a lot older, but you take the fact that Terry was in 50s when we did the original match. You tack more than 10 years onto that, and you're really pushing the upper limit, so I was very reluctant. But when the idea was given to me, I really did some soul-searching, and I thought, 'Take a step back and look at it from a fan's standpoint. This could be one of the strongest things we could give the people.'"

Although the three men could not physically top what they had accomplished more than a decade earlier, they talked and decided that the fans would not likely hold that against them.

"There was a strong nostalgia factor, and the fans were keenly aware of how much time had passed since the original *Three-Way Dance*, so I don't think the fans will expect the same match out of us," Douglas said in an interview conducted about two weeks before *Hardcore Homecoming*.

Still, Douglas said he, Funk, and Sabu all had some trepidation about the match.

"Just because the original was held in such high regard, I think. But the electricity in that building has always been powerful, and one of things we've always thrived on was the emotion of the fans."

Once the main event was announced, Douglas said the reaction made him glad he, Sabu, and Funk had agreed to the three-way rematch.

“Right now, I feel like a kid waiting for Christmas morning,” he said before the show. “All I’ve been hearing from people is that they cant wait for the three-way dance.”

Terry Funk, already appearing (without his knowledge) on advertising for WWEs *One Night Stand*, had to make a choice. Funk believed that at age 60 and with the shows only two nights apart, he could only participate in one of the two shows, because he was determined to give his full effort and was expecting to take a great deal of punishment.

The WWE offer was for about three times as much money as the *Hardcore Homecoming* offer, but after weighing everything out, Funk found he felt the same way Shane Douglas did—that Vince McMahon should not be the one profiting from ECW’s memory, and he would not contribute to something that would do that.

Douglas said Funk’s decision meant a great deal to the shows success, because Funk was the legend whose association with ECW from the beginning helped get the company off the ground. It also meant that the three participants in the *Homecoming* main event would have a combined understanding of crowd psychology that could compensate for the differences in what they were capable of in 1994 versus in 2005.

“I believe I’m a much smarter performer than I was then, and Sabu’s Sabu. I know that only seven months ago, he was battling a serious health problem, but he has once again become the Sabu of old,” Douglas said back then. “He has always busted his ass, and the way he put it to me was, I’ll be there,’ and that was all I needed to hear from Sabu.”

And if the evolved sense of psychology was not enough to get the match where the three participants wanted it to be, Shane Douglas had a surprise—two of them actually. The first was a Terry Funk suggestion, which only went through after many compromises and assurances to the athletic commissioners. Finally, the wrestlers got the green light to add the stipulation that would make up, in bloody action, for what time had taken from the three performers—barbed wire.

The end of the show proved that *Hardcore Homecoming was* not an ego trip by co-promoter Douglas—he was the first to be eliminated after intervention by the shows second surprise: Mick Foley. Foley kept Douglas from using a chain on Funk, who pinned “The Franchise” and show promoter. Minutes later, impromptu referee Foley counted Funk down when Sabu delivered an Arabian Facebuster to end the match.

Foley showed he still understood the Philadelphia fans' mind-set. He first zapped Douglas with his mandible claw, involving his WWF sock-puppet creation, Mr. Socko. This brought a round of boos and a rousing chant of "Socko sucks!", which Foley had been anticipating. Seconds later, he wrapped barbed wire around the inanimate mascot with which he had entertained thousands and went after Douglas again. This time, the fans approved.

John Bailey said the June 10 show was a reunion that lived up to his high expectations.

"*Hardcore Homecoming* was the first time I was excited about going to wrestling in a long time," he said.

Bailey, straw hat and all, sat in the front row for *Hardcore Homecoming*, and he shouted at the heels and served as a spitting target for villainous wrestlers, as if becoming ECW's uber-fan again was like riding a bicycle.

Bailey said the Douglas show carried more of the rowdy, unpredictable spirit of ECW than the pay-per-view bearing the company's name two nights later.

"I just thought the pay-per-view was a little more reserved than *Hardcore Homecoming*. Really, they should have had the pay-per-view at the ECW Arena. And the pay-per-view focused more than it should have on the new guys—I've got nothing against those guys, but I feel like true ECW fans pretty much were there for the older ones."

Tracy Smothers, who worked both shows, said that *Hardcore Homecoming* seemed more like the real ECW even though the WWE show was the one that used the ECW name.

"It was just more comfortable, the way ECW was," he said. "Not that Vince's show wasn't, but when you go to work for Vince, there are agents around and production people—it's a business, and you never forget that. ECW was more carefree and fun, and I don't mean that bad on either one of them. At Vince's show, the guys who were the ECW guys all stuck together, so it was all cool."

Lynn said all the emotional investment remained intact for the *Homecoming* show as if ECW had just ended instead of having been gone for more than four years.

"It was an incredible atmosphere, like every night in that building, in ECW," he said.

ONE TRITE STAND

In truth, the *One Night Stand* pay-per-view and the weeks leading up to it bore out many of Shane Douglas' fears. It started with the three-way confrontation on *Raw* between Heyman, Vince McMahon, and Bischoff, portrayed as a historical summit meeting of the heads of the "Big Three" of the 1990s. As part of the discussion, Heyman established that ECW was more than just what wrestling purists called *garbage wrestling*. He said emphatically that ECW was much more than bloody, violent brawls involving wrestlers smashing each other's heads with hard objects.

Immediately following that segment was an "ECW rules" match between Chris Benoit and Yoshihiro Tajiri in which the two athletic, talented grapplers pounded each other with objects for about two minutes. It was garbage wrestling at its trashiest, and anyone watching who had never seen ECW before must have thought Heyman was blatantly lying about what ECW was and what it was not.

With the main angle for the show being Bischoff on *Raw* and John Layfield on *Smackdown!* bringing an anti-ECW contingent to *One Night Stand*, several former ECW performers now in WWE rose to the defunct company's defense. Ironically, Layfield, one of ECW's most vocal critics, was not originally planned for the show. Kurt Angle was to have led the *Smackdown!* contingent, playing off of his disgust over the Raven-Sandman crucifixion angle a decade earlier, but Layfield went to McMahon and asked to be involved. Layfield had publicly complained that ECW's wrestlers had no idea how to work matches, but before his 1995 arrival in the WWF (as Stan Hansen clone Justin Hawk Bradshaw), he had tried to gain employment in the ECW. Heyman thought he was terrible and wouldn't take him.

This culminated, on the night of the pay-per-view, with a mob fight in the ring (ironically, the pseudo-ECW show was held in New York's Hammerstein Ballroom, the site of ECW's last pay-per-view, *Guilty as Charged* in January 2001), with the ECW alumni clearing out the WWE stars.

There were a few problems with the scenario, though. All night long, ECW stars pelted the WWE herd with insults that Layfield, in particular,

brushed off, not even registering that the words bothered them. Ultimately, it took a threat from WWE megastar Stone Cold Steve Austin to make the WWE contingent come down and face off with their ECW nemeses. Yes, the mob of a dozen wrestling stars had no fear even when ECW's entire *One Night Stand* lineup (sans Eddy Guerrero, who felt taking such a popular stance would damage his recent heel turn) was in the ring. But the threat of one top WWE star whipping the lot of them forced the villains into action. Still, in the end, the last music that played belonged to Taz, as he choked out Kurt Angle with the Tazmission to one of the biggest pops of the night.

For many, however, *One Night Stand* was not about McMahon or who was profiting from the wave of extreme nostalgia. Instead, it was about a last chance for the crew of misfits to put on a show under the ECW banner even if it was ECW in name only.

Francine came back to manage Tommy Dreamer one last time in his match with The Sandman against the Dudleys. That main event was the only *One Night Stand* match she watched in its entirety.

"I saw a little of it while I was at the pay-per-view, but I didn't get to sit down and watch the entire show," she said. "I was happy to be a part of it, and I'm thankful for the opportunity to work again with the ECW crew."

Steve Corino, whom C.W. Anderson described as one of his best friends, avoided both the *Homecoming* and *One Night Stand* shows altogether.

"Corino says, 'I want to be the dick that turns it down. I've moved past that,'" Anderson said. "Well, I say hell, man, it's a payday. Go out there and have fun, which was what I did."

Former New England promoter Paul Richard said he thought long and hard before deciding to take in the *One Night Stand* pay-per-view at an area theater.

"I almost didn't go, but I had to see what they were doing," he said. "I don't know what I was expecting, but there were 700, 800 people there, watching it on screens. It was unbelievable, how big it could have been. It really made me glad I went, because it gave me a chance to sit there and think, 'Wow, I had something to do with all of this.'"

Bob Artese, who served as ring announcer for both *Homecoming* and the WWE show, said each stood out in its own way although the show in Philadelphia felt more authentic.

“I thought *Hardcore Homecoming* on the whole delivered more of the ECW kind of wrestling and atmosphere,” Artese said. “What really saved the McMahon show, *One Night Stand*, was the Tanaka-Awesome match and the last match with the flaming table.”

Indeed, Mike Awesome and Masato Tanaka seemed to arrive at the Manhattan Center via a time machine. For at least a few minutes while they battled, it was 1998 again, with Tanaka taking an Awesome power bomb through a table at ringside and Awesome diving outside the ring, like an oversized luchador.

ECW: One Night Stand was a fast-paced show, complemented by what might have been Joey Styles’ best announcing work ever. His performance was integral to getting over the concept of the show, and his work got him a WWE contract.

Michael Vettor said that WWE’s *ECW: One Night Stand*’ was a nice tribute, but it was not ECW.

“I got to be part of the real ECW, and I was part of a once-in-a-lifetime thing,” the director said. “I don’t think WWE can ever recreate it, but as you saw during the pay-per-view, the crowd will not let ECW die.”

But former ECW webmaster Brett Schwan said ECW was gone except in fans’ memories despite any effort to recreate it.

“The one in Philly, *Hardcore Homecoming*, was a great show, but it wasn’t ECW,” said Schwan, who now teaches graphics and website design and dabbles in wrestling with his personal independent wrestling site, www.wrestlingclothesline.com. “ECW’s dead. And the WWE one? Forget it. To even think that with the WWE crew, Vince is going to bring ECW back, it’s not happening. I think that *One Night Stand* show was, for all the people hoping it would come back, more like an exclamation point at the end of a sentence.”

ONE MAN’S EXPERIENCE

C.W. Anderson was one of several wrestlers who worked both reunion shows.

He worked the *Hardcore Homecoming* in Philadelphia, and when it came knocking again, he was able to work the Pittsburgh event, but not the one in Cleveland, because of a conflicting booking he had already accepted.

In Philadelphia, he and Simon Diamond battled Chris Ghetti and Mikey Whipwreck, but in Pittsburgh, they faced a familiar duo—Danny Doring and Roadkill.

"Danny and Roadkill were always my favorites to work with," Anderson said. "The first eight or nine months I was in ECW, I was married to those guys every weekend. When they changed my match in Pittsburgh to where I was working against them, I got really pumped."

Anderson said he heard about the WWE show weeks before he had any inkling he would be part of it.

"I was working for Dusty [Rhodes' Georgia-based independent group, Turnbuckle Championship Wrestling] the weekend before they announced it, and Tommy Dreamer was on the show," Anderson said. "I shared a room with Dreamer, and he had all this stuff out. He was saying, Took at all the ECW shirts I have to take to Vince.'"

When Anderson asked why, Dreamer told him about the plans for *One Night Stand*, but did not invite him to be part of the show. Anderson said he felt slighted by apparently not being even considered, but tried not to let on.

"I was like, 'Well, good luck,'" Anderson said.

As the WWE event drew near, however, Anderson did get a call from Dreamer.

Heyman had called Dreamer, now a talent-relations executive in WWE, and said he wanted Anderson at the show.

"Dreamer called and asked me about it and told me what it paid, and I just said, 'Great!' He had wanted to work me, to do 'I Quit 2' on the pay-per-view, but he ended up doing a match with the Dudleys and The Sandman, so I was going to tag with Swinger against Doring and Roadkill," Anderson said.

Hours before the show, Anderson was told his match had been moved from the pay-per-view to WWE's preshow *Extreme Heat* program on Spike TV to make time for the bits involving the WWE wrestlers playing the anti-ECW roles. Then, WWE decided Andersons match, which also had changed into a singles match, would not be televised at all, but would be used to warm up the live crowd. Shortly before the start of the show, Anderson was told his match had been scrapped altogether.

But the trip was not a total loss for the grappler. He still got his promised payment, plus a piece of memorabilia.

"I took the $400 *One Night Stand* chair they gave me home and sold it on eBay," he said, laughing. "You know, seriously, I would have much rather earned my money, but that was taken out of my control."

By contrast, Anderson's match at *Hardcore Homecoming* changed only once, putting him into a high-rewing opener as Simon Diamond's partner against Mikey Whipwreck and Chris Ghetti.

"Man, I couldn't have picked better opponents," Anderson said. "And listening to that crowd right before we went out got me so pumped up. I tell you, I had been ready to come back to that place."

Anderson was far from the only one caught up in the crowd's infectious fire.

"We were standing out there, waiting to go out there, and Simon looks at me and goes, 'If you can't get your A game on tonight, there's something wrong with you.' You just can't capture that atmosphere."

WAS *ONE NIGHT STAND* A SUCCESS?

Interestingly, that pay-per-view has been the one for which WWE-generated buyrates numbers have been hardest to obtain. Could the company be hiding an embarrassingly low number or could it be hiding the fact that a crew of misfits who wrestled in a bingo hall once a month drew more than the slick big-budget WWE's own "superstars" (the word *superstar* to describe a pro wrestler is © by World Wrestling Entertainment, at least according to a threatening letter the company sent TNA in 2005).

Going into the event, some WWE insiders had told McMahon that he should regard 175,000 buys as a huge success, and WWE television director Kevin Dunn told McMahon that even that assessment overestimated ECW's niche. Dunn had frequently told McMahon that ECW's fan base was so vocal that it gave people the impression it was bigger than it truly was.

As it turned out, the top WWE brains grossly *underestimated* the power of ECW. WWE initially released an estimate of 268,000 buys, a mark that shattered what any genuinely ECW show had done.

Weeks later, the company upped that number to an estimated 320,000 (a much bigger jump than the usual difference between initial estimates and later ones, which fall around 20,000 buys), but then fell silent. Some cable-industry insiders speculate that when the final number is released in 2006, it will be 375,000 to 400,000, a number that would trump almost every WWE pay-per-view of 2005.

People close to Vince McMahon said he was blown away by what he saw the night of *One Night Stand*, although he tried to put on a stoic front.

One person said, "He thought it would be a nice show, and when it was over, the fans would leave happy. He was not expecting this outpouring of emotion or the kind of buzz around *One Night Stand"*

The person, a WWE employee who asked to remain anonymous, said that shock might have been part of the reason for WWE's sudden dropping of all things ECW the night after the show.

The person said, "I think he was kind of threatened by it, not in the sense that ECW was going to take over WWE, but in the sense that it was not something he could ultimately control. What you have to understand about Vince McMahon is that he *has* to have control. I mean you don't even want to be in the same room with him when he sneezes, because he just gets furious. It drives him *crazy*. And if you ask him, Vince, why do you get so worked up over sneezing?' he'll tell you the truth. He'll say, 1 fucking hate it, because I can't control it.'"

C.W. Anderson said he wasn't surprised at how badly WWE botched the *One Night Stand* follow-up, given how the company had handled the ECW/WCW invasion.

"Once Vince took over, it was like he couldn't carry anything," Anderson said. "They really dropped the ball. I don't know the criteria to be a writer there. I guess all you have to do is know cursive, because they've got no idea what they're doing. They had so much they could do to take it a new direction, and they did nothing. The WWE guys were there so that if it did well, they could say, It did well because of our guys,' and if it didn't, they could blame it on ECW. As far as their workers, I look up to guys like Hunter [Triple H], Benoit, Shawn Michaels, but the guys writing those shows have turned it into total soap opera. It's all talking."

One Night Stand lived up to its billing in one sense—it truly was a one-time event although talks in WWE persist of making the event an annual one. The next night on *Raw*, anti-ECW heel Eric Bischoff was

reminded of the beating he had taken the previous night. Bischoff responded with, “Last night never happened.”

And that seemed to be the company’s motto. Blue Meanie showed up on *Smackdown!* for a match with John Layfield that played off of the assault that happened at the end of *One Night Stand*. Layfield went after Meanie in apparent retaliation for some things Meanie wrote about him on the Internet. The *Smackdown! showcase* was just a one-off, designed to build Layfield’s issue with Batista. Their motivation for offering Blue Meanie a shot on the show was to head off any litigation from what had happened on *One Night Stand*.

TAKING OUT THE COMPETITION

But if WWE wasn’t going to capitalize on ECW’s legacy, McMahon seemingly wanted to ensure no one else would, either. The Philadelphia *Hardcore Homecoming* show ended up being a huge success, and promoters planned future shows in three cities that had been ECW strongholds—Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Buffalo. However, McMahon worked to thwart them, becoming every bit the threat to the independent promoters which Heyman had portrayed him as being to ECW fans a decade earlier. WWE officials complained to the owners of the buildings where the shows would be held, asserting that the entire concept infringed on the ECW trademark, which WWE held.

Even though some of the same talent would work both shows, some sniping went on. Tommy Dreamer, on an edition of the WWE Internet radio show *Byte This*, said the *Homecoming* crew was leeching off of ECW’s name, which they did not own.

In response, at a q-and-a held after *Homecoming*, Shane Douglas noted that it was WWE that had put up advertisements featuring such ECW stalwarts as Terry Funk, Raven, and Douglas himself, even though none of the three was working the show.

That night, Douglas asked what seemed to be the obvious question: “*Who’s* the fucking leech?”

McMahon also tried to snatch away talent and prevent them from working *Homecoming* shows. Some, like Sabu, did work the WWE show, but refused to break their commitment to the *Homecoming* shows.

"It's actually pretty comical, because I knew he might get one or two pieces of talent, but guys like Sabu are honorable in that old-school kind of way, where once they say they'll be there, they'll be there," Douglas said. "I knew we'd still have a good strong core, even if Vince managed to pull one or two pieces away."

Douglas said even *he* got a WWE offer.

"That was fun, because I got to tell WWE to shove it right up their asses," he said. "I knew all I had to do was the promo I did about it, because one thing Vince hates is being told no."

The person who made the call was John "Johnny Ace" Laurinitus, who had been Douglas' tag-team partner 15 years earlier. Douglas said he would have taken the offer—*if WWE* had only met his price.

"I told my good friend' Johnny Ace that sure, I'd do their show—for $144,000," Douglas said, laughing. "That was what I was still owed by ECW, so I figured I'd either get the money they owed me, or I'd have the pleasure of telling Vince McMahon to fuck off."

Jerry Lynn believes that McMahon, having conquered the wrestling world, continues to look for enemies.

"All that stuff about him trying to sabotage *Hardcore Homecoming was* just about ego," Lynn said. "He has all the money he'll ever need, so now, it's all a power trip with him. It's all about ego."

Hardcore Homecoming returned in September for a trio of shows whose results were not nearly as satisfying to the performers or the promoters. McMahon had tried to block the shows, claiming the *Homecoming* promoters had infringed upon the ECW trademarks he owned by billing the shows as the "Extreme Reunion Tour." Managers of the arena in Buffalo bowed to the WWE pressure and cancelled that city's planned *Homecoming*, but the Cleveland and Pittsburgh shows went on as planned.

Douglas said Buffalo's advance was weak enough that McMahon might have unknowingly done the group a favor, forcing the cancellation of what could have been a money-loser.

The Cleveland show was a sad wakeup call to those who saw the rousing success in Philadelphia as a sign of things to come. Where

Philadelphia drew a sellout of more than 1,000 fans, Cleveland drew about 300 with about 200 more tickets given away.

In Cleveland, the women and men who had busted their butts on the shows realized that *Hardcore Homecoming* was not the beginning of something—-it was the end of something.

That ending came on November 5, 2005, when the group returned to the building that had been known as the ECW Arena for the show that was announced as the last *Hardcore Homecoming*.

CHAPTER 24

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

“ECW completely changed the landscape of professional wrestling. There were ideas that were copied, and wrestlers who newer would have made it otherwise, who became big stars because of the exposure ECW gave them. There were barriers broken down, and a lot of people who became very successful in wrestling, not just wrestling, but in promoting, who owe ECW a lot more credit than some of them are probably willing to give it.”

–DAVE MELTZER, EDITOR/PUBLISHER OF THE *WRESTLING OBSERVER NEWSLETTER*

ECW’S INFLUENCE ON WRESTLING SHOULD BE OBVIOUS to anyone who saw the WWF’s meteotic ascension in the late 1990s. Although WCW pum-meled the WWF in ratings fot years, Vince McMahons company turned things around by abandoning the family-friendly concept of wrestling the WWF had pushed in the 1980s. By the end of the 1990s, WWF wresders were brawling all over the arena. The lead babyface flipped people off and chugged beers in the ring. Storylines played off of real-life events more than ever before. Scantily clad women took up more and more television time, as sex was increasingly a selling point of WWF shows. In short, the WWF became a big-budget version of ECW. Even in WWE’s historical account, *The Rise and Fall of ECW*, however, ECW’s influence on the company that now owns its trademarks and match tapes was

underplayed. Of course, history is written by the victors, and WWE has been very creative in rewriting history.

INNOVATORS ‘R US

ECW might have been a trendsetting company, but its own influences were obvious. Heyman was exposed to heavy gimmickry and fast-paced feuds while working as a ringside manager in Memphis in 1987, and his territorial start in Florida earlier that year had brought him to the creative character-driven booking that survived promotional founder Eddie Graham.

“In a lot of ways, that show was cutting edge, but in another way, it was a triumph of old-school wrestling,” Sheldon Goldberg said. “When you watch their TV, you can see the concept Paul had about promos, making the characters mean something, giving the reaction of reality that fans weren’t getting in other companies. ECW tapped into something that was a necessary thing to tap into, those promos and old-school values put into a new-school package.”

Kevin Sullivan said that ECW’s hardcore “innovations” were rehashed ideas from wrestlings territorial era. In the Florida promotion, where Sullivan had spent years headlining in the 1980s (and where Heymans first break as a manager came), bloody gimmick matches were frequent main events.

“All Paul E. did was take the Florida product and update it,” Sullivan said. “There’s nothing new. Everything is stolen from someone. Remember Abdullah the Butcher? Remember The Sheik? These geniuses,’ all they have is a good memory, and they’re pretty clever about how they present their old ideas. Paul did magnify the ideas. He was always a sponge of knowledge. He took the Florida Championship Wrestling concepts, which [Florida owner] Eddie Graham had learned from Dory Funk Sr. in Amarillo. It’s all someone rehashing an idea they learned somewhere else. Wrestling has evolved, but it’s still basically the same thing it was 25 years ago.”

One area where Sullivan thought Heyman excelled was in the way he packaged wrestlers to maximize their strengths and mask their weaknesses.

“I always thought Paul E. did the most with the least,” Sullivan said. “That was what made it a viable product for a long time, and Paul E. made a lot of guys into stars. I think it still shows today, because people want to get those tapes.”

Evidence of Sullivan’s point is the sales performance of WWE’s *The Rise and Fall of ECW* video, which was the second best-selling wrestling DVD of 2004 and one of WWE’s best-selling videos ever. That DVD alone made so much money that it could have put ECW in the black even after its decade’s worth of debts. But as it turned out, the only person who ended up turning a profit on ECW was the top heel in ECW history—Vince McMahon.

The death of ECW also meant the death, in a major sense, of a longstanding tradition of pro wrestling.

Tracy Smothers said ECW was the last major promotion in the United States that generally trusted its wrestlers to work a match by the feel of the crowd.

“I watch WWE today, and those guys are like robots,” he said. “They’ve got a script for the whole match, and they’re sticking to the script no matter what. If I was working with Terry Funk, or any of those guys, we’d go out there, and the only thing we knew was about how long we were going and the finish.”

Heyman likely gets neither as much praise nor as much criticism as he deserves, both for ECW’s creative successes and the mess he made of the business side of things.

“He probably wasn’t the best moneyman, and the way he handled things was part of the reason ECW folded, but as far as creative, the man was a genius,” front-row regular John Bailey said. “He catered to his audience, and he gave us fans what we wanted to see.”

According to those who knew him, the way Heyman saw it, all of the kids who had bought Hulk Hogan action figures in the 1980s had grown up. People who were 18 to 20 years old could be more likely to watch a show that contained more of the sex and violence that was popular in other programs.

ECW was also rife with performers and individuals who have not gotten their historical due for their respective impacts on the wrestling business.

One of ECW's greatest assets was its uniquely excitable announcer, Joey Styles. As Dave Meltzer noted in a 1999 edition of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, "Styles tries to make good matches seem like classics, while WCW's crew makes great matches look insignificant."

Magazine veteran Bill Apter, co-host of 2004's Wrestlereunion convention, said ECW would be remembered more for its impact than for its own level of success.

"It was this group of rebels who succeeded in grabbing the attention of the huge power brokers in the wrestling business. Not many people have been able to do that."

Dr. Ranjan Chhibber said he first discovered ECW more than nine years before befriending Heyman, when both were in WWE. In August 1995, Chhibber was a graduate student in Buffalo when he saw something that carried a bit of the flavor of the wrestling he remembered from his youth.

"With all the bloody matches on TV, the only thing I'd ever seen that came close was seeing Dino Bravo versus Abdullah the Butcher when I was growing up in Canada," he said.

But ECW was a totally new animal, he said.

"It was the political incorrectness of it all that really sucked me in, with the first episode I saw," Chhibber said. "I had never seen ECW, because, as it turned out, it was banned in Canada. No TV station dared carry it back then."

NOT TO BE IMITATED

ECW even spawned an imitator that tried to position itself as more extreme than ECW itself. In 1998, California independent promoter Kevin Kleinrock was looking for someone to run a wrestling company on behalf of a big investor he had lined up. The moneyman was Robert Zicari, better known in some circles as porn maven Rob Black. Blacks production company was called Extreme Associates, and he put out series of videos with titles like *Rough Sex*, *Sexual Atrocities*, and *Moral Degeneration*.

Black figured he already had cameras, sound equipment, money, and access to what he saw as a similar demographic—everything he needed to start his own wrestling company, except for a ring and some wrestlers.

Before long, he had the ring and the wrestlers, too, and XPW (Xtreme Pro Wrestling) was born in 2000.

Many people in the industry pegged Black as a bad fit, but in truth, wrestling and adult entertainment were not exactly separate worlds. Wrestling's audience was heavily male, even more so for extreme wrestling, the likes of which ECW promoted and which Black wanted to promote. ECW had even worked out brief appearances with adult film stars Jasmine St. Clair and Jenna Jameson in the past.

Black knew the players in ECW, because he had tried unsuccessfully to buy into the company. Speaking about one of ECW's main cogs, Black once reportedly said, "I'm a pornographer, and people think I'm a scumbag, but the people I work with think that guys a scumbag, so if he can be in wrestling, there's hope for me."

XPW ended up releasing six videotapes of shows they held. At a 2000 ECW pay-per-view in Los Angeles, some XPW wrestlers were out in the crowd and a fracas ensued. Nothing came of it, and a few years later XPW quietly vanished off of the independent wrestling scene.

EXTREME POP CULTURE

Part of ECW's appeal was that fans got to be part of the show through tacitly encouraged chants and fans actually inserting themselves in matches by bringing weapons to hand to wrestlers.

"The show incorporated the idea of productive participation, where the audience members participated in the show they were watching," Chhibber said. "I never brought any weapons myself, but I was at a show where someone brought a keyboard and New Jack hit Jack Victory with it. Paul was brilliant to incorporate the fans into shows that way."

Bill Apter said ECW lived on in much of what fans saw in modern WWE shows.

“Through the whole time it was in existence, the WWF’s eyes were on that ECW product,” Apter said. “I think a lot of the aggressiveness of the Stone Cold character came from watching ECW. WWF, in a way, was able to get away with more because the networks looked the other way, since they had this great, profit-making TV show. ECW was a true innovator; they took the wrestling business to a new place, similar to how Gorgeous George brought wrestling out of the dark ages in the 1950s. ECW changed the face of not only what happened in ring, but of the fan base as well. There always had been a barrier between fans and wrestlers, and although there was still the physical barrier in ECW, it was as if the barrier was invisible.”

Ultimately, Chhibber said, the obstacle that kept ECW from ever achieving mainstream success was the same extreme content that made the small fan base so rabid.

“You’d see them pile-driving women and putting people through burning tables,” Chhibber said. “Then, the next week, they’d apologize, but if it was a woman the week before, they’d pull out an inflatable doll. That’s the kind of incident that would catch a hardcore fan, but which a mass audience is never going to accept.”

Ironically, it was skillful repackaging of these edgy ideas that allowed the WWF to overtake WCW in the wrestling war.

“That’s the sad thing,” Don Laible said. “The WWF was becoming hardcore, and people looked at it like it was this groundbreaking thing. All they were doing was copying ECW, just putting it on a grander stage.”

However, Chhibber rejected the notion that ECW was misogynistic.

“Now, feminists would say they were advocating violence against women, but in my opinion, ECW did not advocate or glorify that at all. I think it was more American society interrogating itself. You have to remember this was the mid-1990s, the height of political correctness,” he said.

Chhibber said the time ECW came along was a key part of its appeal, as the presentation was ahead of its time.

“If ECW came out now, I think no one would have taken a second glance, because television is filled with far more violent, rabid programs, and the visual style was a precursor to reality shows, almost like the way *The Blair Witch Project* was put together. Everyone called that movie revolutionary with a raw style that was more real, but ECW had been doing

the same thing for years. And that type of presentation was important to what ECW was."

The content was against the grain, as well, Chhibber said.

"Let's use the babyface violence against women as an example again," he said. "The mid-1990s was the height of radical feminism. You had Hillary Clinton basically running the show when her husband was president, and you had people getting in trouble for the most ludicrous things. There was a period there when it seemed like if you said something and a woman got offended, you would get fired or expelled. No matter what, women were always right. And then on ECW, there's Tommy Dreamer pile-driving Beulah for interfering in his match. He was acting out the frustration of the American male."

But Chhibber said women were more empowered in ECW than they had been in any other wrestling group.

"Beulah was not just a woman, but someone who was a very powerful character, as powerful in ECW as [legendary manager] Bobby Heenan was in the AWA or the WWF. I really think that's something other promotions really have not accomplished. In WWE and WCW, women were limited to being eye candy. Paul gave them a chance. Beulah was a hot babe, so to speak, but she also had a powerful character."

THE DOWNSIDE OF EXTREME

Raven said the way ECW played to its fans contributed to the rise of "smart fans" and spot-happy workers who aim to please those fans, two trends he did not see as positive ones.

"Todays fans think they're so smart, but a lot of the stuff they rave about is not better work—it's great acrobatics and interesting wrestling, but it's not great working," he said.

Raven was also critical of the punishment some wrestlers put themselves and each other through to show fans how tough they are.

"There's no art in working stiff," he said. "The art of professional wrestling is how stiff you can make it look and how light it feels. Wrestling at its most money-drawing is about emotion, not athleticism. I compare it to

the TV show *Happy Days* in the 1970s. Everyone thought the Fonz drew, but Richie was who drew, because he was the show's emotional backbone and the character people could relate to, and you'll notice, once he got off the show, it just nosedived."

Raven said *high spots*, or flashy flying, had a place in wrestling, but as a complement to the story being told, not as a replacement for one.

"You can't build around high spots. You have to build around emotion. Look, Hulk Hogan was the biggest draw of his era, because he could toy with peoples emotions, but he cant work a lick, according to so-called 'smart' fans," he said.

Heyman, Raven said, was a booker who knew how to draw that emotion out of people.

"Paul E. was mercurial, and Paul E. was eccentric, but he was far and away the best booker I was ever around," Raven said.

Ernie "Stately Wayne Manor" Santilli said he was even less impressed with the "smart fans" then and now.

"They all acted like they cared so much about the guys, but I think that's all bullshit," he said. "I think they were there for the blood and guts, like someone going to the races, hoping to see a car crash. If they didn't just care about blood and guts, why is [independent promotion] Ring of Honor usually drawing only 300 fans a show in the same market? If they cared, they would have booed all those consecutive unprotected chairshots."

Some of its descendants are even more brutal, but none has managed even to fill ECW's niche. Fan Mike Aulthouse said that none of the independent groups that has run shows in Viking Hall, the former ECW Arena, has managed to capture the same flavor.

"ECW was like top-caliber wrestlers in a small setting," Aulthouse said. "And then they added more violence than the WWF was doing at the time. You see these groups today, like Combat Zone Wrestling, and they're totally homegrown guys. Every Combat Zone show was barbed wire and glass, just total carnage. Those guys were bleeding everywhere, except for the forehead."

Regardless of whether Vince McMahon wants to admit it, ECW had a huge influence on the in-ring style that became popular in the 1990s.

That style might have been more exciting for fans, but it also numbed fans to the physical damage that their favorite wrestlers often inflicted on one another.

“That ECW mentality, with the bumps out of ring and all the dangerous spots, changed everything,” Don Laible said. “They were defying nature out there. After a while, it was like the fans expected them to dive from the ring through a table at ringside or onto the guardrail and then just get up and walk off.”

ECW wrestlers paid a toll for the excitement they provided their fans. Stu Kaplan said that after a night of ring wars, the dressing room often looked like a field hospital.

“I tell people to this day, ‘People can say wrestling is fake, but I’ve been in the locker room at the end of shows,’” he said. “I’ve seen guys get hit with chairs, I’ve seen Buh Buh Dudley’s head cut open, and I know this isn’t fake. These guys are hurt. They come in with smiles on their faces, carrying their bags, joking, and talking to each other. But at the end of the night in the locker room before they get to their cars and put on a front for the fans who hung around after, they are hurt. Unless you’ve been in that locker room, you don’t know how much it hurt. You fall out of the ring and land in the second row of ringside, landing on hip or shoulder, that hurts. You take a shot from Sandman’s cane, and see what it feels like. The first time I worked, I saw Buh Buh when he got hit with it, and he had such a welt on his head.’”

But Buh Buh Ray Dudley, like most of the ECW wrestlers, often came back out after the show for the most diehard of fans, who would wait upwards of an hour for a few minutes with the wrestlers.

“Buh Buh’d just put a Band-Aid on it and come on out,” Kaplan said. “There were always 20, 30 fans hanging out. They wanted to meet the guys, take a quick picture. The Sandman would come out with his head all cut up, because that was kind of his gimmick, but the fans were the people who had made them, and they didn’t want to show these fans they were hurt.”

A TOP ACT OR SMALL-TIME FRY?

Fan Ryan Dunch said that if ECW was a significantly smaller stage, the wrestlers never seemed to register it.

“The shows I went to, there was less than 1,000 people there, and every wrestler went out there and busted his ass,” Dunch said. “It felt like a pay-per-view, because they all made an effort and made the fans feel like part of it. There was just something intangible about the atmosphere, and I don’t know what it was, but I’ve never been to another wrestling show that could compare to it.”

Many of its in-ring crew still believe the product was strong enough to catch on if it had enjoyed more stable financial support.

Francine said the biggest of the many misconceptions about ECW was “that we only worked out of ‘bingo halls.’ We were working in front of thousands of people week after week, and if we had had the right financial backing, we would still be around today, because there was no locker room that could have compared to the ECW locker room in terms of loyalty and work ethic.”

The ECW that Paul Heyman took over was not notably different from a dozen other independent wrestling promotions operating at the time. Like most indies, ECW put a few name wrestlers at the tops of the cards and bolstered each event with a crew of locals. Making Tito Santana a “name” who would not be coming back, champion of the company, was the epitome of “small-time indie.” ECW’s presence on television seemed to owe as much to Gordon’s desire to be on television as to its value as a promotional tool for the live shows. For whatever else anyone can say about Paul Heyman, his was the hand that guided ECW from being a regional independent to being a legitimate (albeit unprofitable) trendsetter that survived for seven years during the most competitive period in the history of the wrestling business.

And Heyman booked ECW from September 1993 right to the bitter end, an impressively long stint that yielded some truly creative gimmicks and situations.

If Heyman had not tried to drag ECW from its roots, if ECW had remained a Philadelphia independent, the company might well still be around today, but what would it be? Heyman led the charge to expose ECW to more television markets, to get it on pay-per-view, and, finally, to get it on a national cable outlet. He struggled with people in his own company, he struggled with the truth, and he struggled with a business climate that was not conducive to his success. And he knew that each battle would be

ECW's last, if he lost, until he finally did lose the battle that cost him his national cable outlet, the battle that *was* ECW's last.

And Heyman battled while constantly having to get new stars over to his demanding fan base, because most wrestlers, as soon as they became made, bolted for the better-paying WWF or WCW. A lesser booker would have crumpled within months, as many wrestling companies that popped up over ECW's lifespan did.

Many top ECW talents became potential weapons in the heated war between the WWF and WCW, and the constant departures forced Heyman to try new faces.

In doing so, Heyman showed something not even Vince McMahon, or any of the various WCW bookers did—a willingness to experiment, to offer a variety of attractions. ECW had more than its share of bloody brawling, but it was also the first American promotion to showcase Mexican *lucha libre*, and it featured some of the best technical wrestling you were likely to find. That variety came about out of necessity, but there's no denying it.

A FAMILY BUSINESS

At the same time, Heymans refusal to play straight with his own crew played into ECW's downfall. Heyman should not be remembered either solely as a wrestling genius or solely as a con man. Nor should he be remembered as the sole mind behind ECW. Shane Douglas, Terry Funk, Mick Foley, Raven, and Sabu were only five of the many wrestlers who guided their own fondly remembered programs in ECW. Tommy Dreamer, Stevie Richards, The Dudleys, and Taz were but a handful of the men who were so devoted to ECW that their blood and physical sacrifice were only the surface of their contribution to it—they worked behind the scenes, doing promotional work, setting up the ring, and designing and selling merchandise. A lot of companies claim to provide a family atmosphere, but ECW really was a family—albeit a dysfunctional one.

And sometimes families fall apart. ECW's demise left a lot of people angry at Heyman, and rightfully so, in many cases, but that anger should

also come with the realization that Heyman and ECW made stars out of people who would never have attained stardom without them.

Terry Funk said, “Paul E. would definitely deceive the boys, if he felt like it was something he had to do, to keep ECW going. And maybe that deception was sometimes necessary for that company to continue to exist. So should we condemn Paul E., should we set fire to his ass? Or should we praise him? I’d probably be inclined to singe his ass a little and then brush him off and give him a hug. Ill tell you this—things would be awfully different in the wrestling business today were it not for ECW. I sure wouldn’t be making the money I am at my age. Sabu wouldn’t be making the money he makes. ECW was the stage; it was what we all had to have, because we had to perform, in order to be acknowledged by this business in a way that would allow us to make something of ourselves.”

Funk said Heyman’s creativity and his willingness to tell tall tales to wrestlers and business associates alike stemmed from the same source—his passionate desire to keep ECW alive at all costs.

“Paul E. always had an incredible love and compassion for the business,” Funk said. “The most important thing to him was being the creator behind ECW, and that became his main thing, keeping it alive. It became more important than friendships, certainly more important than his allegiances with his companions in the business, and that’s the truth of the matter. He loved ECW and the business more than he did his friends. He was willing to sacrifice his friends for ECW, and he did more than once. Was he *wrong* for that? Hell, I think Vince [McMahon] would do that any day of the week. Hell, he’d probably sacrifice his old lady for the WWE.”

Funk said Heyman and McMahon were hardly the only two who ever got caught up in their companies to that degree.

“You find that with a lot of promoters. They became consumed with continuing their promotions, and that’s what happened to Paul E. And it happened to the extent that doing that became more important than anything in his life—more than the money in his bank account, more than his personal relationships, more than anything. It takes over, and you do what’s necessary for it to continue to exist. With Paul E., he was a fan who made it into the business, and even though he didn’t start ECW up, that was his baby.”

CHAPTER 25

JUNE 10, 2005
HARDCORE
HOMECOMING

IT'S 4 P.M., and the atmosphere is a lot like that of a high school reunion. People who haven't seen each other in years are hugging, smiling, and swapping stories. In a few hours, when the atmosphere in the non-air-conditioned building more closely resembles that of a sauna, they'll be swapping cane shots and piledrivers.

A little after 5 p.m., Shane Douglas calls all the wrestlers on tonight's show to ringside, because he has a few things to say. He thanks them for coming and tells them that they were the ones who "revolutionized a business that was on its ass" more than a decade earlier.

And they did. Regardless of the size of the fiscal mark ECW made on the wrestling scene, its influence cannot be overstated. ECW was the company that popularized the three-way dance, or Triple Threat (as WWE calls it) match. WWE's own "hardcore wrestling" phase has come and gone, but every time Triple H pulls out a hammer or some other unorthodox weapon, you're seeing something with roots in ECW. Every time you watch high fliers dive out of the ring onto each other, or see someone go through a table, or hear a crowd applaud a series of chain-wrestling moves, or listen to an interview laced with shoot comments, you're experiencing the ghost of ECW.

Douglas continues pumping up the crew of wrestling misfits who populate the show, telling them the waiting crowd outside is "ready to pop its ass off, because you instilled something in them."

Outside, people are lined up for blocks, waiting to get in. Some skipped breakfast to get there early enough this morning. Many of them are the people who filled the building when it was the ECW Arena. Tonight's show is a sellout, and Douglas says everyone on the card gets a bonus, because of "those people, those crazy motherfuckers waiting outside." Yes, in a break from ECW tradition, the wrestlers will actually be getting paid *more* than they had expected for their blood and sweat.

A rumor circulates outside and inside that Vince McMahon will have a vehicle outside, plugging Sundays *ECW: One Night Stand* pay-per-view, a prospect one of the *Hardcore Homecoming* performers finds very funny.

“Here we are,” the wrestler says, “this little group, and he feels threatened enough to do that?”

No such vehicle showed up, although the independent group Combat Zone Wrestling did send a van with a video screen plugging its show in the same building on June 11.

Douglas also tells the wrestlers that during the show they are not to use the initials of the company with which many of them are most famously associated.

“Vince bought the name, but he cant buy the legacy. That is ours forever. Now, we cant control what they chant,” Douglas says, pointing at the seats around the ring that wont be empty for much longer, “but we will not say those letters tonight. ECW is dead, buried, and well respect it forever, but by the end of tonight, we want the words coming out of the fans’ mouths to be, *Hardcore Homecoming”*

Looking out at dozens of faces, many belonging to people Douglas knows will be working for the enemy Sunday night at *One Night Stand*, he says that his ultimate prize would be for every fan who *sees* both shows to declare, “That show Friday night kicked ass, and Sundays sucked.”

And now, it’s 7 p.m., and the doors are open. People stream in, all but attacking the souvenir and concession stands. Most of the T-shirts are gone by the time the second match starts. As one fan walks in, he smiles and says, “It’s good to be home.”

An hour later, Joey Styles kicks the thing off by entering the ring, taking the microphone from ring announcer Bob Artese, and starting off with an “Oh my God!”

Styles thanks the fans for coming out one last time and looks genuinely touched beyond the emotional melodrama that is pro wrestling, as the fans chant, “Welcome back! Welcome back!” at him. Two nights later, he’ll give what might be the announcing performance of a lifetime, at WWE’s *ECW: One Night Stand* pay-per-view, but he sure seems to be doing that show for money and this one for love.

The moment isn’t exactly ruined by Joel Gertner’s entrance, interrupting Styles’ emotional return. Far from it—the crowd erupts into a “Gertner!” chant within seconds of his “Well, well, well!”

In the four years since ECW closed up, Gertner has dropped a lot of weight, but none of his vulgar lyricism. On this night, he has traded in his textbooks for his leopard-print jacket with the furry collar.

He's a quiet, friendly guy away from the ring, but when he walks to the ring, the pleasant college student is replaced by the boisterous "sexual intellectual" who recites an obscene poem involving Paris Hilton, teeth, and a sweater (use your imagination). Don "Cyrus" Callis interrupts them, and they get into it, first verbally and then by rolling around in a scuffle. These two spent the last several months of ECW's lifespan starting off shows with similar conflicts, but they never seemed to settle it. They don't on this night, either, as Styles breaks them up.

And the Philadelphia crowd of more than 1,000 loves it. For much of the night, they make more noise than any 15,000 fans at any WWE show.

They give everyone an ovation from Mikey Whipwreck and Chris Ghetti facing Simon Diamond and C.W. Anderson in the opener to the three stars of the main event.

The second match, a comedic affair between Tracy Smothers and the Blue Meanie, starts off with a statement from Smothers' fellow "Full Blooded Italian," J.T Smith. Doing what is probably his best Al Pacino, Smith tells the fans, "We thought we were out, and you pulled us back in!"

A video shows a parade of images, featuring ECW stars who died too young. The pictures of the wrestlers—Louie Spicolli, Road Warrior Hawk, "Big" Dick Dudley, Eddie Gilbert, Brian Pillman, Ted Petty, Anthony Durante, and Chris Candido—serve as a grim reminder of the price too many men paid to be part of one of wrestlings most unique phenomena.

The video leads to a segment that brings together Johnny Grunge and Pitbull 1, the surviving members of The Public Enemy and The Pitbulls. They represent two of the most successful tag teams in ECW's short history, but a bigger pop goes to Tammy Sytch, the recently widowed other half of Candido.

For a moment, the cruder side of the hardcore crowd shows itself, as they chant, "Show your tits!" at her, but Sytch cuts off the chant by taking a microphone and asking, "Do you have any idea how long it took me to get into this dress?"

Even Kid Kash, who plays a heavy heel to the live crowd, gets his name chanted after losing to Too Cold Scorpio in a match full of brawling around the building and outside-the-ring dives.

A few minutes later, Shane Douglas is likely close to having an aneurism backstage when New Jack either forgets or completely disregards the warning against saying the letters “ECW.”

New Jack gives an electric speech after a brawl pitting him and John Kronus (a neck injury to Perry Saturn prevented the planned reuniting of The Eliminators) against Axl and Ian Rotten, who reunited not for a match, but to “beat the shit out of someone Philly-style,” Axl explains.

New Jack thanks the fans for sticking with the guys in the company through years of mismanagement and later the certainty that the company was going downhill. He says he knows that someone else is holding an ECW show on Sunday, which elicits a “Fuck you, Vince!” chant, one of the loudest of the night. New Jack says the fans know better than to fall for the WWE show. ECW, he says, is not the “steroided-up nigger bitches they got in their locker room.”

Jerry Lynn and Justin Credible put on the match of the night, and the crowd’s ovation is an early birthday present for the usually quiet Lynn, who says he hates to “toot my own horn, but that’s not bad for 42 fuckin’ years old.”

The fans are into everything, including one of the great singalongs in the history of the building, as The Sandman comes to the ring. He makes his way around the packed house slowly enough that the entire “Enter Sandman” song is played out by the time he makes it into the ring and stamps out his second cigarette.

Raven, The Sandman’s opponent, chooses to make light of the fans’ appreciation, an ECW heel to the bitter end.

“You people are too stupid to know when you’re being insulted,” he says after a previous verbal blast earns crowd applause.

About 40 hours after the *Hardcore Homecoming* performers left the arena, *ECW: One Night Stand*, a Vince McMahon production, would begin. And despite Douglas’ wishes, Sunday’s didn’t suck. Actually, it turned out to be one of the better pay-per-views WWE has put out in years. Still, for raw, heartfelt emotion, the Hammerstein Ballroom on Sunday could not touch the lightning Douglas, The Sandman, Tod Gordon, Raven, Sabu, Terry Funk, and company had bottled two nights earlier in this sweaty little arena in South Philadelphia.

From the “You fucked up!” chant that brings a grin to Tod Gordon’s face after a microphone short-cuts off his introductory welcome speech, to

the “Thank you, Shane!” chants that cap the show, *Hardcore Homecoming* epitomized what made ECW what it was—the strange, sometimes-dysfunctional relationship between the most hardcore fans around and the wrestlers who maimed and in some cases killed themselves for the entertainment of those fans.

After the show, Terry Funk said it best, in the q-and-a session, echoing his words from the *Forever Hardcore* DVD. Funk called the unique rapport between fans and performers the essence of ECW.

And he was right. ECW wasn’t Paul Heyman or Tod Gordon. It wasn’t even Shane Douglas, Sabu, The Sandman, or Funk himself.

As a company, ECW was a recklessly run business whose lack of foresight damaged a lot of people who deserved better. But as a wrestling product, ECW was the combination of elements—the violence, the variety, the voice (of Joey Styles), but perhaps most importantly, that fan-wrestler relationship, and no matter who owns the letters or who runs the talent, that relationship lives on only on videotape, in memories, and in one-shot reunions.

Or as New Jack put it in his address to the fans, “*You re* ECW, and the rest of those motherfuckers can suck my big, black dick!”

For better and for worse, you’re *extremely* unlikely to see anything resembling it again.

CHAPTER 26

(WW)ECW

“I don’t ask my audience what they want. I tell them what they want.”

–VINCE MCMAHON, JANUARY 15 EDITION OF *RAW*

IN 2006, five years after Vince McMahons wrestling empire became the only show in town, things were not great. Pay-per-view and TV numbers were down about 25 percent from 2005, which itself was no record-setting year. Each year since, the company’s 2001 peak had seen declines. By 2006, opening up pay-per-view in such new markets as Europe was all that kept some shows from being outright money losers.

Between the history DVD and 2005 reunion pay-per-view, one of WWE’s biggest success stories had come from a project that was not a Vince McMahon creation—ECW.

In January 2006, another McMahon had an idea that would breathe new life into ECW. Shane McMahon, Vince’s son, ran WWEs online division and told his father he wanted to start an Internet-only show. In meetings with production and creative crews, the McMahons decided to make the online exclusive ECW, which seemed to be the hottest thing in wrestling just six months earlier.

From all accounts, Heyman was not crazy about reviving ECW, knowing a bad product would kill even the nostalgia that had brought in so much money in 2005. However, he knew that the hardcore fans, ECW’s staunchest supporters, frequented wrestling sites on the Internet, giving him a built-in audience. If the new ECW could deliver strong content, it would never be a smash, but it could work.

Heymans WWE contract was expiring, but he wanted to try to steer the new ECW, so the two sides reached an agreement wherein Heyman was an “at will” employee, with either side able to terminate the employment at any time.

As Vince McMahon talked with his cadre of advisers about the idea, someone suggested running it by cable networks to see if any would be

interested in paying rights fees for the show.

McMahon contacted various broadcasters and was floored with the response. Cable, syndicated, and overseas networks were all more interested in getting an ECW show than the bottom-of-the-WWE-barrel *Velocity* many of them were already airing. Video game companies also showed interest.

The original plan was to have only one pay-per-view a year. But innovation doesn't pay the bills, and when WWE got a chance to turn a buck with ECW, the company did just that.

ECW ended up at the edge of prime time, 10 p.m. U.S. Eastern time, on cables Sci-Fi Channel.

Along with the income stream, the show's placement ensured that WWE's brass would take a more active hand in the show.

People close to Heyman said he believed reviving ECW would be its death knell. All he felt he could do was stave off that inevitable, ignoble end for as long as possible.

One of the few areas of agreement between Heyman and McMahon was that simply rehashing the original ECW would not work. Some of the fans who originally supported ECW reveled in its outlaw status. Those fans would not support an ECW whose profits went to Vince McMahon, regardless of how good the product was. Even if a new ECW could recoup all the original fans, that fan base was not enough to keep ECW from going under.

To Heyman, the product had to be as fresh as possible. Many remember ECW as chairs, tables, and blood, but Heymans goal was trendsetting, innovative wrestling. A decade earlier, ECW had been just that. However, in 2006 those elements were old hat, not what Heyman wanted the "new ECW" to embody. The cusp of the wrestling business was mixed martial arts, the "real deal," as exemplified by Ultimate Fighting Championship.

Heymans vision for ECW was, essentially, a worked version of UFC—clean finishes in every match, less outrageous storylines, and more realistic action.

Vince McMahon and Kevin Dunn shot that down, saying fans would never go for it. Perhaps they were right—UFC's mainstream assault meant that more fans than ever knew what "real" in-ring battles looked like.

The first underwhelming, specific mention of ECW's permanent return was on May 26's *Smackdown*. With the second *One Night Stand* already in the works, Heyman mentioned ECW would be back for good during an on-camera discussion with Teddy Long, who played *Smackdown* general manager.

Smackdown was an appropriate place for the announcement. Under the Sci-Fi deal announced at the beginning of June, ECW would air live in front of the *Smackdown* arena audience.

WWE officials surely hoped those audiences would react to ECW better than the *Raw* crowd did three nights later.

At that year's *Wrestlemania*, Rob Van Dam had won a "money in the bank" match in which a shot at the WWE championship was at stake. As the winner, Van Dam could have his title match any time he wanted within the next 12 months.

Van Dam hit the ring on the May 29 *Raw* to announce he wanted his shot at June 12's *ECW: One Night Stand* pay-per-view. For Van Dam, the main event was vindication. After years mired in the mid-card despite being one of the company's most popular guys, Van Dam couldn't wrestle at the original *One Night Stand*because of his knee injury. Now, he was ready to shine.

The Tacoma audience was less impressed. Five years earlier, Tacoma's crowd reaction to Booker T and Buff Bagwell had effectively killed any chance of WCW surviving the WWF's purchase of its remains. The fans had not grown more accepting. Tacoma booed Van Dam's challenge, even though champ John Cena was one of the most vociferously booed babyfaces in history on a national basis.

At least Van Dam got a reaction. Later in the show, when Heyman came to the ring to hype ECW's return, most individuals sat on their hands.

WWE itself seemed about as disinterested. Van Dam's and Heyman's announcements played second fiddle, as did the surprise announcement that Heyman had drafted Kurt Angle to ECW, to a series of skits building up Triple H's refusal to kiss Vince McMahon's ass (literally) in the ring.

Angle's ECW assignment was a last-minute switch, sparked by a decision that also affected the championship situation. WWE announced that Van Dam's match with Cena would crown the first champ of the new ECW, in addition to Cena defending his title.

Heyman, McMahon, Dunn, and various others met often to discuss how to crown the ECW champion, but the talks were rocky. When Heyman pitched Van Dam beating Cena to win both belts, the answer he got was, “Absolutely not.”

McMahon wanted Cena, for all the boos he got in arenas, kept strong as the top merchandise mover and among the top draws. Heyman next suggested Van Dam have Cena beaten, but with the referee unconscious, unable to count the fall. A man in a black bodysuit and helmet would run in and attack Van Dam, causing him to lose. The man would remove his helmet to reveal Randy Orton. The ideas supporters pushed that Orton’s appearance would be a shock, as he had been on suspension for weeks.

The first Sci-Fi show would then open with a heel Heyman declaring Orton ECW champion. The situation was not ideal to anyone tied closely to ECW’s relaunch, but it beat the other likely scenario, in which Van Dam would lose the Cena match but then become ECW champion. That would have told fans that ECW was led by a champ who not only couldn’t win the big one, but whose title was a consolation prize.

Two weeks before *One Night Stand*, McMahon changed his mind—Orton was not coming to ECW. Triple H, in the midst of a babyface turn, wanted Orton to be a heel foil for him on *Raw*. Angle became the substitute, as ECW’s ranks would need bolstering from WWE stars. Heyman, who knew he needed more star power, first asked McMahon about rehiring Brock Lesnar. Likely still stinging from litigation stemming from Lesnar’s contentious 2004 departure, McMahon said no.

Without Orton in ECW, the planned finish made no sense. Heyman ultimately convinced McMahon to let Van Dam win outright, not because it would be the best way to launch ECW, but for John Cena. By June, Cenas months-old feud with Edge was petering out, but no heel on *Raw* was ready to become his next big rival.

When referee John Finegan went down during *One Night Stands* main event, a man in a black bodysuit and helmet did enter the ring. However, he speared Cena through a table, enabling Van Dam to pin the WWE champ as Heyman ran in to count the fall. The helmeted man revealed himself as Edge, and his attack breathed new life into his feud with Cena.

One Night Stand did about 280,000 buys, 168,000 of which came from American viewers. That was about 15 percent fewer buys than the original

One Night Stand, but it was still WWE's second-most-ordered show (of four) that fiscal quarter, making it a success.

Two nights later, ECW debuted on the Sci-Fi Channel. While many fans thought Sci-Fi a poor fit, Heyman, according to friends, did not agree.

"Paul was a Sci-Fi fan, and he was not opposed to ECW getting onto Sci-Fi," Ranjan Chhibber said. "One of Paul's favorite shows is *Doctor Who*. And the way I looked at it, they didn't keep the old *Battlestar Galactica* writers for the new show, but they kept Paul E. for the new ECW, which I thought was a testament to his brilliance."

Still, all was not harmonious. In keeping with the network's theme, Sci-Fi wanted space alien and vampire wrestlers. One executive figured Sabu would make a perfect vampire. Heyman squashed that quickly. People who knew both men said Heyman stuck up for Sabu more than once over the next few months, and the two mended the relationship that had soured five years earlier.

Sci-Fi's expectations were not high, nor were WWE's. Ratings for the original ECW on TNN had ranged between 0.68 and 1.16, and Sci-Fi's average rating was 0.75. Everyone had reason to celebrate when the rating came in—2.79 with more than three million viewers.

Although the agreement called for a live show, network executives asked it to be taped hours in advance so they could edit any offensive chants based on the raucous *One Night Stand* crowd. As it turned out, they had nothing to fear. The Trenton, New Jersey, crowd sat on its collective hands for the first show.

The show also established the pecking order. Excepting Sabu and the Sandman, only stars with WWE pedigrees were getting pushed. Kurt Angle put down former ECW champ Justin Credible in less than two minutes.

Although the second week's show saw a drop of about 20 percent in viewership, ECW seemed off to a good start. Any optimism would be short-lived.

On June 24, the new ECW came "home" to the ECW Arena for a non-televised house show. The show was marked by an apparent battle of wills between the sellout crowd of 1,100 fans and WWE. That night appeared to be a stalemate, but it became the first of two nights that fan reaction soured WWE on having an ECW that seemed like ECW.

The fans booed WWE ring announcer Justin Roberts, chanted, "This show sucks!" after a Sabu-Justin Credible match went less than three

minutes, and serenaded Paul “The Big Show” Wight (another WWE star transferred to ECW) with “Don’t come back!” Fans also broke out in chants of “Fuck you, Vince!” throughout the show, a unique Valentine to WWE’s owner. The raucous crowd even got physical when a group of John Cena fans got into it with the ECW faithful.

WWE brass’ message seemed to be, “This is the product you will want, and if you don’t like it, we don’t want your money.” Heyman went to the ring to hype the July 4 TV taping at the Wachovia Center. Sandman went to the ring to his generic WWE guitar theme, depriving the crowd of the “Enter Sandman” ring entrance that was a huge part of his appeal. Backstage, agent Dean Malenko was telling wrestlers to ignore the “ECW” chants and tone down the insane, out-of-the-ring dives.

When Vince McMahon learned of the crowd reactions, he decided only a few thousand fans of the original ECW existed; half lived in New York, half in Philadelphia. He loudly shared this view with Van Dam and Heyman, among others, saying most who bought the DVDs and ordered *One Night Stand* were simply curious WWE fans.

McMahons verdict on ECW fans? “Fuck those people; we’re moving on without them.”

The next night, the writing was on the wall for ECW, as every wrestler connected to it got buried at the *Vengeance* pay-per-view. Orton beat Angle clean and Cena beat Sabu while a crew *of Raw* job guys and mid-carders beat up 99 percent of the ECW roster. The only guy who escaped burial was Van Dam, who beat Edge in a WWE title defense. Van Dams star was on the rise.

That star came to a sudden halt on July 2 on the shoulder of a road in Hanging Rock, Ohio, where a state trooper pulled over a shirtless Rob Szatkowski for speeding 73 mph in a 55-mph zone. He and his passenger, Terry Brunk, were both arrested for drug-possession charges.

While the citations bore the names of Szatkowski and Brunk, wrestling alter egos Rob Van Dam and Sabu felt the brunt, especially Van Dam.

Sabu had testolactone pills for which he had no valid prescription, but they were not narcotics. Van Dam had (please sit, as this will come as a shock if you’ve read the rest of the book) a small amount of marijuana, plus painkillers for which he had a prescription.

People who knew Heyman said he became aware of the arrests early the next morning, after a call from a friend who received “Google” alerts of

news stories featuring wrestler names. The *Ironton Tribune* (Ironton, Ohio) had covered the case. Heyman was reading the article on his portable communication device when he walked into that morning's production meeting. During the meeting, Heyman left abruptly. Some in the company later concluded he had gotten messages from Van Dam and Sabu.

Heyman, or someone close to him, contacted WWE legal, who called talent head John Laurinitis. Laurinitis and Heyman met with Vince McMahon, Kevin Dunn, and other members of WWE's braintrust. Heyman knew Van Dam would have to lose the WWE title, but Heyman hoped to salvage the ECW title.

Heyman even pitched turning the arrest into fuel for an angle, admitting it on TV McMahon shot down the idea, saying that was not the direction to go.

In the two nights after the traffic stop, Van Dam lost his two titles. On July 3's *Raw*, Edge captured the WWE title. The next night, on ECW, The Big Show beat Van Dam to become the first person to have held the WWF/E, WCW, and ECW championships.

Van Dam began a 30-day suspension. People close to him said he felt "pretty shitty," because he knew the incident would affect a lot of people in ECW.

Indeed, Van Dam's situation seemed to open the door for ECW opponents to be heard. Their calls were for ECW to fall more in line with the rest of the WWE product.

After a heel turn from Heyman, The Big Show's title win did give ECW the top heel Heyman had wanted, even if not many saw it—the show drew a 1.45 rating with 1.6 million viewers, less due to a decline in ECW viewership than with the show airing on Independence Day.

McMahon felt that the way to package the new champion was as an unstoppable monster paired with Heyman. For all his size, Big Show's sense of humor and warm personality showed through every previous attempt to make him a beast.

With Van Dam's suspension, ECW had a sudden dearth of talent. Less than a week earlier, Angle began a 30-day suspension for violating WWE's drug policy.

Heyman opened the July 11 ECW show with a promo explaining his turn on Van Dam and establishing himself as the cult-leader character Sci-Fi had wanted him to play.

On the same show, Sabu was disqualified against Justin Credible for legdropping the former Impact Player through a table. Announcers Joey Styles and Tazz explained that Sabu versus Credible was not an “extreme rules” match, WWE’s new appellation for the anything-goes atmosphere of matches in the original ECW.

The “extreme rules” match came from a production meeting in which Kevin Dunn said all three brands—*Raw, Smackdown* and ECW—should be consistent, so fans would accept them all as branches of WWE, the industry leader. Heyman said the company should not rub people’s faces in the fact the rules were uniform. Heyman reportedly thought ECW’s first disqualification should be a big deal, the basis of a major angle. Dunn replied that the sooner the guidelines became established, the sooner WWE fans would accept it.

As dispiriting as recent events had been for fans, Heyman knew he had lost the war for ECW in a planning meeting for the July 18 show, according to WWE insiders. The plan was for The Big Show to battle WWE stalwart The Undertaker to a double countout, following interference from Great Khali, Undertaker’s current rival.

In the meeting, Heyman was livid. He argued that fans expected conclusive finishes in ECW title matches. Heyman said Vince McMahon would never book a non-finish at a *Wrestlemania* because of the cultivated expectations of the fan base, the same reason Heyman was fighting this televised non-finish.

However, Dunn, described by some in the company as the second-most-powerful person in WWE, pushed for the move. Heyman said conclusive finishes helped separate ECW from WWEs other brands, but Dunn opined that very separation was contributed to ECW’s underwhelming performance. In a stunning lack of understanding of his own product, Dunn said what made ECW special was its endorsement by WWE, the industry leader, not the idea that it was a separate entity.

WWE’s seeming war with the very brand it now owned extended into one of the most successful ECW shows WWE ever promoted in terms of ticket sales. Nearly 2,500 people sold out New York’s Hammerstein Ballroom, site of both *One Night Stand* pay-per-views, for ECW’s August 1 TV taping. The crowd was rocking, one of the most excited audiences the relaunched ECW had enjoyed.

But Vince McMahon did not enjoy the crowd at all. WWE's production team had to turn down the audio because of profane chants, including "*Smackdown* sucks." Many of the most negative ones were aimed at the man *Wrestling Observer* publisher Dave Meltzer called "one of the hand-picked superstars of the company."

Muscular Dave Bautista had come up through Ohio Valley Wrestling, WWE's feeder circuit, and had become one of the company's top attractions after a 2004-2005 feud with Triple H. None of that carried any weight with the crowd, who chanted, "Change the channel" as Batista (WWE changed his last name's spelling) challenged The Big Show.

The Hammerstein crowds antics caused McMahon to change plans for ECW's second pay-per-view in December. The event, originally set for the Hammerstein, would instead be held in Augusta, Georgia, a city that was anything but an ECW stronghold.

One of the few things the crowd seemed to enjoy strongly was the debut of Phil Brooks, a.k.a. CM. Punk.

In the independent group Ring of Honor, Punk had established himself as a talented, young wrestler who came off as real, a rare characteristic in the cartoon-violence world of pro wrestling. WWE had placed him in Ohio Valley, where talent executives saw nothing in him and planned to cycle him out of the company. Heyman reportedly had followed Punk's work since Ring of Honor and handpicked him for ECW. While fans were hot for his athleticism and innovative style, Punk was one of many who got the tag "doesn't know how to work" from Triple H and Shawn Michaels. He was also not a favorite of Arn Anderson, veteran journeyman wrestler-turned-WWE agent.

In 2005, Heyman was booking Ohio Valley and pushed Punk, even though WWE management told him Punk was a lost cause. In the seven months Punk spent in OVW, he was never called up to *Smackdown* or *Raw*, staying in the developmental group while taller, muscular wrestlers with a fraction of his in-ring ability breezed by him.

Heyman told anyone who would listen that Punk was a potential superstar with a tenacious babyface persona that would keep coming back no matter what he faced.

Another wrestler brought to ECW from WWE developmental was Deep South Wrestlings Mike Knox. Instead of nurturing young Knox's talent, however, WWE agents berated Knox, made him shave his goatee,

and cut his hair. The result was a neutered performer who looked unremarkable and had none of his former confidence. His valet, Kelly, would overshadow him despite having no discernible skills, aside from looking good in bikinis.

August's first ECW TV show marked the return of Rob Van Dam, but by the end of the summer, ECW would be missing another key talent—Kurt Angle. Even months after his late-August departure, multiple stories bounced around the wrestling business. Angle himself gave multiple versions of events in different interviews.

In one version, Angle was overmedicating himself to keep his injury-riddled body going. By August, he had already served two drug suspensions, and some in WWE believed McMahon fired him after he refused to go into treatment for which WWE would pay. Another version was that Angle quit because McMahon refused to take him off the road. Angle told one interviewer that McMahons response to Angles request for convalescence time was, "Youre an Olympic athlete. Suck it up."

His happiness in ECW was also in dispute. Some, including Angle himself in various interviews, have said that the wrestler saw ECW as a demotion. Others in ECW said Angles only complaint was that he was not champion and that he text-messaged McMahon, Heyman, and others six or more times a day with ideas. One person said Angle's ultimate aim was to win the ECW title enough times to go into *Wrestlemania* against Triple H in a battle of 10-time champs (counting his Pan-Am Games amateur title).

WWE had no intention of replacing Angle with another star at the expense of *Raw* or *Smackdown*. ECW would have to make do with what it had.

One thing ECW did have by late summer was a TV deal. WWE and Sci-Fi renewed their agreement to keep ECW on the network. After August 29, some at Sci-Fi might have been questioning the decision, as ECW scored a 1.86 rating with just over two million viewers. Still well over the network average, the rating was ECW's lowest to date, excepting the July 4 show. However, it was also practically ECW's high-water mark for the next couple of months, as WWE's third brand hemorrhaged viewers.

On screen, autumns themes were Rob Van Dam's quest to regain the ECW title and the rise of CM. Punk. Behind the scenes, the themes were money and the ongoing fight in WWE to remove as much of ECW's personality as possible. By October, the terms "extremists" and "vixens"

were out, and “extreme rules” matches were increasingly sparse. A major opponent of “extreme rules” was main-eventer and McMahon son-in-law Triple H, whose main events were littered with tables, chairs, sledgehammers, and blood.

In November, WWE also removed house shows from ECW’s schedule. While TV rights fees kept the Sci-Fi show profitable for WWE, the non-televised events were money losers. Even with lower ticket prices than *Raw* or *Smackdown* live events, ECW shows had been averaging about 1,000 paid and $25,000 in ticket sales, barely enough to cover talent costs alone. ECW’s top guys would be shuffled into the *Raw* or *Smackdown* events, but many of the lower- and middle-card performers got worried, and with good reason. By the end of the year, many of them would be gone, mostly replaced by castoffs that *Smackdown* writer Michael Hayes no longer wanted.

But, as the saying must go in the wrestling world, every time Vince McMahon closes a door, he opens a window. Through the window came Bobby Lashley, an explosive muscleman who was unhappy working with Hayes on *Smackdown*. Rising star Lashley was happy to come to ECW, where Heyman wanted him to play a crucial role in ECW’s future.

Despite Vince McMahons reluctance to put the title back on Van Dam, the original plan was for the wrestler to recapture the belt in *December to Dismembers* elimination-chamber main event.

The elimination chamber was a six-man cage match. Two men started with the other four in small casings, one at each ring corner. A “random” casing would open every few minutes, allowing a new participant to join the fray. Participants were eliminated after submitting or being pinned. The last wrestler left won. The six men scheduled for the match were Van Dam, Punk, Lashley, Test, Big Show, and Sabu.

Heyman originally came up with the idea to end the match with another winner. He told others he had tried to figure who could feasibly challenge Van Dam at 2007’s *Wrestlemania* pay-per-view. In his mind, none of the heels could be ready. The audience had roundly rejected Test and Bob “Hardcore” Holly, no other heel was even close to established, and none of ECW’s few viable babyfaces could effectively get over as heels in time to make for a meaningful challenge. Heyman tried another approach—what if a heel walked out of the elimination chamber as champ and Van Dam challenged him at 2007’s biggest show?

When they were together in Ohio Valley, Lashley had repeatedly asked Heyman to manage him as a heel. Heyman deferred, saying his in-ring days were over. When Heyman tried to draw Lashley to ECW, Lashley said he would only switch if he could be a heel, packaged with Heyman.

With the pay-per-view weeks away, Heyman finally had a plan for the main event. Van Dam would beat Big Show early in the match, which would end with Van Dam and Lashley as the last two. Heyman would throw a nightstick into the ring for Van Dam to use, but Van Dam would refuse. After a series of moves and reversals, Lashley would get a chance to use the object, and he would clobber Van Dam with it, capture the title, and throw in with Heyman's villainous on-screen character.

Heyman told those around him this plan would allow him to decide whether to put Punk or Van Dam in the *Mania* spot, depending on who was hotter as the event approached.

Lashley's ECW debut was November 7, and from all accounts backstage, he was excited about the new plan.

Vince McMahon tentatively approved Heymans finish and direction. Hours later, he told Heyman he had decided the plan needed only one tweak —Lashley should remain a babyface.

Heyman protested that fans would reject Lashley after spending months becoming emotionally invested in Van Dam and Punk, on whom the babyface pushes had focused. Heyman reportedly also told McMahon, among others, that making Lashley champion as a babyface left ECW with the very problem Lashley's heel turn would have solved—no heel would be ready for a major match with him. McMahon insisted that Lashley was the superhero the fans wanted and needed.

Still, Heyman wrote a show that contained several beats upon which future shows could build and that would still end with Lashley's coronation.

Heyman booked CM. Punk to start with Big Show. Punk would make Show submit to his anaconda vise finisher before being eliminated himself later in the match. This would accomplish three things.

Beating the champ first in an elimination match was one of Heymans favorite tricks (see the four-way TV title match in 1996 in which champ Chris Jericho lost first and Taz 1999 ECW title loss), because fans, now guaranteed to see a title change, would be glued for the rest of the match.

Second, beating Big Show would propel Punk into the next level; even though he'd be eliminated later, Punk would still be the one who stopped

the unstoppable monster.

Third, Heyman thought he could get a match out of Lashley versus Big Show on television, with Show able to say that Lashley never actually beat the champ.

As was widely known in the company, Paul “Big Show” Wight would be out of action indefinitely shortly after the pay-per-view. The 7-foot, 500-pound wrestler had been working on various back and knee injuries for months, remaining active only out of loyalty to the company that had needed him in a pinch.

McMahon didn’t like the scenario, however, saying that it watered down Lashley’s win. The WWE owner dismissed Big Show himself when he fought for the idea, saying Heyman had somehow brainwashed the big man.

Heyman then pitched Van Dam and Punk starting, which would at least create some interest in what was going to happen between them. McMahon said no.

Vince McMahon had launched the era of Hulkamania, one of the wrestling business’ most prosperous eras, by putting a muscleman over as a dominant hero. That was his vision for *December to Dismember* and ECW, with Lashley in the Hulk Hogan role.

According to more than one backstage source, McMahon’s only response to Heymans objections was that Heyman needed to “quit being so fucking negative and get with the program.”

In a meeting with the wrestlers in the match, Heyman, and the agents, held shortly before the December 3 pay-per-view, agent Arn Anderson laid out the plan—Punk would start with Hardcore Holly, then Van Dam would come in, then Test. The first three out would be Punk, Holly, and Van Dam. Then, Test would battle Lashley until the emergence of Big Show. Lashley would overcome the two titans to win the belt.

Van Dam voiced his hatred of the idea, to the surprise of no one, as he had never been shy about saying something that might tick off management.

Van Dam’s complaints were no surprise, but Big Show was a team player and did his best to work within whatever constraints he faced. His complaint was that he was going soon; he wanted to put over Punk on the way out, and this was his only chance.

Punk also complained that his quick loss would bury him to the fans watching, but since he did not have enough WWE television exposure to be

a star, his opinion did not matter.

Even Test said the match would do more harm than good.

Lashley reportedly said nothing, partly because a top-level run could be a career-making break, even if it was in WWE's clearly established third-class brand, and partly because he had seen Heyman lose the same fight.

The only other wrestler in the match, Holly, also reportedly had no complaints. McMahon had decided to substitute Holly for Sabu, again over Heymans protests, because he wanted more heels in the match to give Lashley more to overcome. Heyman countered that Sabus character was that of a highflying madman; the brutal chamber would be the ideal showcase for his capacity for aerial violence.

A videotaped segment an hour into the show saw Sabu laid out, the victim of a mysterious attack. Reasons for not advertising the change are unknown outside the company's inner circle. Even though the decision had nothing to do with his ability, Sabu was reportedly as distraught about it as fans would be.

The day of the show, only two matches were announced—The Elimination Chamber and The Hardy Boyz versus MNM in a battle of onetime-only reformed WWE tag teams. The lineup did not set Augusta on fire—only 1,700 tickets had been sold days before the show.

December 3 was a long, miserable day for Paul Heyman, more than one company insider said. Having failed to convince McMahon that the live fans would razz the new superhero mercilessly, he then learned that the agents booking *December to Dismember* had put together a short show. Most WWE pay-per-views cost $39.95 and last for about two hours, 40 minutes. *December to Dismember* was set to end after two hours and 17 minutes.

McMahon was not worried, saying fans would be happy to see a new champion and a 10-minute celebration. He compared the timing to a one-round Mike Tyson fight that still left fans excited with what they had seen.

Heyman was to cut what would prove to be his last in-ring promo before the main event, and he offered to fill time by delivering a 10-minute promo that he swore would be a verbal masterpiece. McMahon told him not to go over two minutes, 30 seconds.

In a conversation others backstage recounted for the rest of the night, Heyman saw Big Show, who remarked that Heyman did not look happy.

Heyman reportedly replied that, for the first time, he was not even motivated to walk out to the ring to give a promo for what should have been the biggest night in his professional life.

Heyman had spent most of his adult life fighting to keep ECW alive, but WWE's corporate atmosphere and legions of yes-men had done what no one else could do, what not even bankruptcy could do—they killed Heymans love for ECW, which he had often described as his baby. He no longer belonged in the ghost of the thing he had essentially created from the scraps of a small regional group in Philadelphia.

None of Heyman's interview was planned out or even conceived before he spoke on live pay-per-view, said one person in ECW. Heyman told an increasingly hostile crowd that Hulkamania would die when Hulk Hogan did, and chants of Rie Flairs "Woo!" catchphrase would vanish when Flair did, but that ECW would live on long after Heyman was gone.

Some backstage said the speech was that of a man who knew his time within WWE's version of ECW was up, a last chance to ask fans to stay, even though he would not.

The show ended as McMahon and his sycophants had planned and as Heyman had predicted, with Lashley overcoming all odds except for a hostile audience.

Augusta might not have been ECW country, but its fans resented Lashley winning the title after months of buildup for Van Dam and (to a lesser degree) Punk as the top guys.

Fans in the arena groaned when veteran mid-carder Holly was announced as Sabu's replacement and again when Van Dam eliminated Punk early in the match. Minutes later, all life seemed to drain from the live audience as Test eliminated Van Dam. From that point to the time the show went off the air (10:18 p.m. U.S. Eastern time, 25 minutes early and about 60 seconds after Lashleys win—so much for the celebration), the crowd reacted to nothing in the ring, even when Lashley toppled Big Show to win the championship. The only enthusiasm the audience mustered was a brief chant of "TNA" (the small group that was the closest WWE had to competition and the wrestling home of ECW alums the Dudleys [now Team 3-D], Rhino, and Kurt Angle).

ECW fans or not, the crowd rejected everything Heyman had warned they would reject. The show garnered a record-low approval rating among readers of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*—three thumbs up, 399

thumbs down. Fans around the world knew they had just seen an abysmal show. Most wrestlers on the card knew it was horrible. Promotional genius Vince McMahon had no clue.

Heyman reported to McMahon after the show with ideas on where to go from here, but a glowing McMahon wanted to know what Heyman had thought of the event.

Heyman, whose lack of diplomacy had caused him problems more than once during his career, replied that the show "sucked" and that it did real harm to ECW as a viable pay-per-view product. However, Heyman said he had some ideas on how to repair the damage.

McMahon did not want to hear them. Instead, he furiously grilled Heyman, asking why he was so negative about the grand coronation that had just occurred.

Heyman told McMahon there was nothing to like. Fans had seen their ECW heroes, Van Dam and Punk, beaten without anything to redeem them, and the show ran half an hour short.

McMahon told Heyman that the longtime ECW head did not understand what ECW had become, and he repeated words he said to many others that night—that *December to Dismember* had been "an excellent show with an excellent finish."

The next day, December 4, Heyman and McMahon among those flying to Charleston, South Carolina, Heyman pitched opening the December 5 ECW show with Ariel and Kelly in a match, telling viewers interviews with Lashley, Van Dam, and Punk were going on right then and would be seen later in the show. McMahon didn't like the idea, fearing fans in the arena would chant for Punk. Heyman asked why that was a bad thing, as it showed the fans cared about someone on the flagging ECW show.

McMahon reportedly threw his glasses on the floor and shouted, "Get this through your thick fucking head—my focus is on Bobby Lashley and only Bobby Lashley! That man is the brands icon, the brands superhero. He is ECW and he will be, at the expense of Rob Van Dam, CM. Punk, Test, and everyone else, and you can hit the door if don t like it!"

When the plane landed, Heyman reportedly told McMahon he could fire him if the WWE owner wanted, but Heyman was tired of being talked down to and otherwise all but ignored. Heyman said he and McMahon were a "bad marriage" and asked McMahon if they should simply shake hands

and call it a day. McMahon asked him to stay for that afternoon's writing and production meeting, after which they would talk.

Anyone who has sat in one of those meetings, held hours before each week's *Raw*, will tell you how vocal and animated Vince McMahon gets. He typically has a change, an idea, or a minor tweak for each segment. However, he spent the December 4 meeting in silence, his face growing progressively redder. McMahon was reading the fan feedback to the pay-per-view on his personal communication device. It was the second batch that had come in. Like the first, it was overwhelmingly negative.

After the meeting, Vince and Stephanie McMahon met together privately while Heyman sought out other ECW writers and told them they should be prepared to write the show without him.

Heyman's words again proved prophetic. Only the three of them know all that happened when Heyman went back into the room with the McMahons, but people backstage said later that Vince had accused Paul of ruining the show by obsessing over Punk and getting the talent so riled up about the outcome of the match that they could not perform well. Heyman's response was that he had correctly predicted everything people would hate about the show and noted that those were not self-fulfilling prophecies, because McMahon had not abided by any of Heymans suggestions or ideas.

Whatever else happened in that meeting, Heyman walked out of the room and out of WWE. As of early 2007, he was still getting paychecks, but had no involvement in any aspect of the product that bore ECW's name.

His departure brought mixed feelings. For Rob Van Dam and CM. Punk, Heyman leaving meant that ideas to turn and bury them, which Heyman had fought, would now be fulfilled. Indeed, Holly squashed Punk on the January 9 edition of ECW on Sci-Fi, a show so bad that it effectively acquitted Heyman of any of the shows creative flaws. The show drew a 1.4 rating, ECW's lowest ever on Sci-Fi, including the July 4 show.

Others were ecstatic. While Heymans previous problems with Stephanie McMahon were well known, he reportedly told many that she had tried to broker peace between Heyman and her father when it came to ECW. However, two company insiders said that the night after Heyman left, she was on a company plane with a team of writers and producers that included *Raws* Brian Gewirtz and assistant writer Ed Koskey. They celebrated Heymans departure all the way back to WWE headquarters in Connecticut, popping champagne and laughing as Koskey entertained them

with his Heyman impression. *Smackdowris* Michael Hayes was in a hotel bar when someone came up and told him Heyman was gone. Hayes slugged back his drink and gave a gleeful “Good riddance!”

While a ragtag group of wrestling outlaws and castoffs, ECW had long outlived its natural span. With the might of the most successful company in wrestling history behind it, ECW quickly became an extreme joke in which pettiness and corporate power trips won out over making the project a success.

Paul Heyman was not perfect, nor was he the sole architect of ECW, but the balding man from Scarsdale, New York, might well have been ECW’s spirit, and whatever it is you’re seeing on Sci-Fi Tuesday nights, it’s ECW in name only.

Before long, it might not be even that.